

Reconfiguring Academic Space and Time: Cultivating a Hinterland for Doing Relevance

Universities are continually pressed to produce knowledge of ‘relevance’. While a seminal paper on the subject has argued that relevance is defined by its embeddedness in science society relationships (Hessels, 2009), the nature of these science-society relationships is becoming increasingly interrogated (Irwin et al. 2018). Researchers have recently argued, for instance, that sufficient attention is not paid to the conceptual presuppositions and institutional context that shape what kinds of knowledge become recognized as ‘relevant’ and how (Smit and Hessels, 2021). An increased use of the term in relation to ecological and social crisis has revealed a shift in emphasis (Schneidewind et al. 2015), but this simultaneously has led to a heterogeneous landscape which leaves relevance routinely operationalized and framed in different settings and under diffuse institutional logics (Anteby, 2016).

In response, researchers have called for a more critical analysis as to what ‘relevance’ means and how it is enacted in specific research settings (Brunet et al. 2024). In a recent special issue dedicated to investigating this question, relevance is conceptualized as something necessarily enacted and situated through specific practices and contexts (Brunet et al. 2025). The special issue therefore aims to reframe the meaning of relevance by placing the attention on *doing relevance*; namely, on modes of inquiry and practices which might be useful for its emergence in different situations.

Further elaborating on this shift in emphasis, Sigl and Fochler (2025) provide an in-depth analysis of these possible practices by leveraging existing literature and integrating it with recent research that draws on the experiences of soil researchers in navigating their academic careers (Sigl and Fochler, 2023). A typology of critical and reflective practices is advanced that are particularly useful for *doing relevance*; they outline *reflecting, re-valuing, situating, and synthesizing* as core frames for practices, and encourage researchers and communities to experiment with these practices to the extent that they can under existing institutional constraints.

They further situate this typology and these practices with the broader metaphor of a *hinterland* (Law, 2004), which serves as a useful conceptual innovation to further emphasize the link between practice and the structural conditions which serve to enable or constrain certain practices and subjectivities. Whereas Law uses the term more broadly to refer to the underlying context which shapes and informs scientific practices in general, Sigl and Fochler operationalize the metaphor to point to the conditions and practices useful for doing relevance, or as they put it, the “practices and structural conditions that would contribute to routinizing relevance and building competencies pertinent to re-orienting research towards addressing social and environmental problems” (Sigl and Fochler, 2025). In this respect, a Hinterland for Doing Relevance (HDR) is uniformly situated within the fourth mode of relevance outlined in the special issue; namely, that of transforming academic institutions (Brunet et al. 2025).

Navigating this institutional transformation through cultivating an HDR seems equally interesting as it does challenging. On the one hand, this cultivation must occur, to some degree, *within* existing academic institutions, perhaps in a more regulative sense (Scott, 2003); while also, at the same time, *outside* of existing academic institutions in a more cultural-cognitive, potentially even normative sense (ibid.). Indeed, not only does an HDR fundamentally exist within these tensions but is likewise concerned with transforming this landscape more broadly. This calls to mind the paradox of embedded agency (Seo and Creed, 2003), which asks how actors can change the institutional forms that their very subjectivities and behavior are patterned by. Keeping these paradoxical tensions in mind, the primary purpose of this research is to further investigate how such a HDR emerges as a transformational space both within and for academic institutions.

Research Aims and Question

Within the context, this research has three core aims. The first is to critically engage with the concept of an HDR as it has been developed with its emphasis on practice, and to further investigate and elaborate on the movement towards, and role in, the structural conditions for enabling these practices. In doing so, it will build on the existing suggestions outlined in the paper that Sigl and Fochler (2025) recommend, such as investigating long-term support strategies that are aimed at generating institutional cultures of relevance.

The second aim of this research is to situate and further develop an HDR through the conceptual framework of a boundary heuristic (Klein, 2021), with a focus on both spatial and temporal boundaries. Klein builds on Winter's (1996) suggestion for libraries to become politically and socially engaged knowledge ecologies, and in doing so calls for 'ecologies of spatializing practices' within universities to enable different structural conditions of knowledge production. Along with providing the language and framework of a boundary heuristic, Klein's work will additionally provide a theoretical anchor to ground spatial boundaries within this research, tentatively defined as institutional arrangements that enable and constrain where and how knowledge production practices take place.

Additionally, this research draws on a chronopolitics framework (Felt, 2025), following Felt's argument that transforming academic institutions requires a critical engagement with existing temporal choreographies within them. Indeed, along with enabling the various practices and career paths for relevance that Sigl and Fochler call for, temporal care work is a necessary requirement for the new organizational arrangements that routinising relevance further entails. Temporal boundaries will therefore be grounded at this intersection and are tentatively defined as institutional arrangements that enable and constrain *when and how* knowledge production practices take place.

Finally, the third aim of this research is to critically engage with these more conceptual matters of cultivating an HDR through a case study outlined below. In doing so, it aims to gain further insights into the practices, nuances, experiences, and institutional dynamics of spatially and temporally transforming academic institutions through empirically grounded qualitative research. The question that will frame this research is:

How does cultivating a Hinterland for Doing Relevance reconfigure the spatial and temporal boundaries of academic institutions?

Method

Due to the contextual engagement required to get a sense for an HDR in relation to academic institutions, focusing on one university seems to be the most appropriate way to investigate this question. The University of Vienna seems to be well suited for a number of reasons. First, this work builds on previous research at the university (Sigl and Fochler, 2025) (Felt, 2025) which provides an ideal epistemic living space (Felt, 2013) to develop and reflect on these questions. Additionally, the universities development policy and research strategy both show intentional moves towards cultivating an HDR by both prioritizing social problems and engagements (University of Vienna, 2023) as well as by embracing heterogenous definitions of research excellence (ibid.). Using The University of Vienna as a case study, then, this research will first begin by mapping the growing HDR through a boundary-mapping approach that draws on established examples on boundary work (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), boundary objects (Akkerman and Bakkar 2011), and a more expansive boundary heuristic for approaching complex themes of institutional transformation (Hacker and Binz, 2021) (Klein, 2021). It will map the growing HDR within and around the University of Vienna under the guidance of the supervisor. This mapping will take place in years 1 and 2 and will involve the four boundary elements outlined in (Klein, 2021):

Boundary objects: the various artifacts and documents that shape the understanding of and coordinate action for cultivating an HDR (such as research strategies or policy documents)

Boundary discourse: the themes and vocabulary that frame, legitimize, and facilitate the growth of an HDR (such as discourse on ‘relevance’)

Boundary organizations: the formal or semi-formal organizations that are involved in shaping and cultivating an HDR (such as the STS department or NGOs)

Boundary agents: the key actors involved in shaping and populating an HDR (such researchers and societal actors)

After this boundary mapping, this research will utilize ethnographic immersion (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019) in years 2 and 3 to gain a better understanding of the structure and lifeworld of

this HDR, especially as this relates to the practices outlined by Sigl and Fochler (2025). It will do so with an emphasis on the spatial and temporal constraints or openings that agents and organizations in a growing HDR confront and navigate in relation to these practices. This ethnographic immersion will include, but will not be limited to, 30-35 semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009) with boundary agents involved with the HDR. Interviewees will include researchers at various stages of career development, actors outside the university and administrative faculty involved with its growth, and any other actors deemed pertinent to its cultivation. This qualitative research will also include an immersion into at least 5 research or educational projects taken up by boundary organizations in or around the HDR, along with any other workshops, programs, and events put on by these boundary organizations that are deemed significant and useful; naturally, the doctoral call in which this research is situated stands out as one such potential project for an ethnographic immersion.

To process this data, primarily in years 2 and 3, the interviews and fieldnotes will be transcribed and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), and the research will aim to balance incoming empirical data with theoretical reflection. Additionally, initial open coding (Charmaz, 2014) will be used to identify recurring themes related to spatial and temporal constraints, and focused coding (ibid.) will synthesize these into higher-level analytical categories, making these reflections and themes more concentrated over time.

Finally, in year 4, this research will conclude by further integrating this data and reflections with respect to the aforementioned research goals, positioned with respect to calls for cultivating an HDR (Sigl and Fochler, 2025), as well as calls for ecologies of spatializing practices (Klein, 2021) and for temporal care work (Felt, 2025).

Contributions

By foregrounding spatial and temporal boundaries, this research further develops the HDR concept with a focus on the structural conditions which enable these practices. In doing so, it also additionally demonstrates the complementarity of a boundary heuristic with a chronopolitics framework for understanding how academic institutions transform. Finally, by engaging reflexively with its own institutional site, this research enacts the very practices it studies, contributing to the University of Vienna's HDR not merely as an observer but as a participant in its cultivation.

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