

## **D225 Changing Geographies of the United Kingdom – 15 June 2021**

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to Student Hub Live. In this session, we're going to take a look at D225 *Changing geographies of the United Kingdom*. And I am joined by Carry Van Lieshout who's one of the block leads of the module, and Dave Humphreys, who is a professor of environmental policy and also a chapter author on D225.

Welcome today, both. We've been doing a lot of talking about various inequalities and issues to do with environment. So it's been a topic of conversation close to all of our hearts today. But Dave, I wonder if you could begin by telling us a little bit about the module. It's on changing geographies of the United Kingdom. So what's it all about, then?

DAVID HUMPHREYS: OK, well, D225 is, as the title says, it's about how the United Kingdom is changing, OK, how it was made the way it is, how it's changing at the present moment, and how it may change in the future. And it's been made during a very unusual conjuncture of circumstances that couldn't possibly have been foreseen as recently as 2016. And I'm talking about Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic.

So the module's about changing geographies in the UK, and how we work and live and changes to our cities and population. But Brexit and the pandemic are now an integral part of that module. And the module, itself, has been made under conditions of change, because it's affected how we make the module, you know.

The University closed its campus in March 2020. The Module's been made remotely online, a different and very exciting way of making a module. It's worked very well. For example, Carry and I have never met, but over the last two years, we've become very good colleagues thanks to the wonders of Microsoft Teams. And we've managed to carry out some innovatory work.

Being a distance-learning institution, The Open University, has until now, have never really been able to provide geography fieldwork for our students. But that's now changed. And we're very proud of a new component for this module, virtual fieldwork.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. So these changing geographies within our own localities are, sort of, really impacted on what you've been able to do, but also the content that you've been looking at. But this fieldwork sounds super exciting. Carry, I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about how that might work and, and what's involved.

CARRY VAN LIESHOUT: Yeah, so the fieldwork is a, kind of, new aspect of this module. And it really allows students to a kind of - a chance to, to work as practical geographers. So they get a chance to choose a place and build a virtual portfolio on that place for, the kind of, different practical research ways that, that geographers approach places with.

So for example, they were using census data or survey data to explore a place for that. Looking at online picture archives and other kind of archives to see what has been written about a place, what's the, kind of, cultural imagination of a place. And they get to walk through it, and, kind of,

get this, kind of, more ethnography style methods of a place, taking pictures, and build it all into one portfolio, and learn about a place through that.

So alongside it's kind of built through the module step by step. And you get to learn about a place for this practical methods, and then through theoretical methods in the written material, and combine those both to both be a geographer and learn what geographers do.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Gosh, how exciting, then, to be able to research one particular place. Damon, if you were researching one particular place, then, would it be Milton Keynes?

DAMON MILLER: I think so, actually. Milton Keynes is really interesting as a, as a place. And I know some colleagues in some of the other disciplines who have done research into, into Milton Keynes. And it's a, it's a smart city, so some of the sociologists have been involved in the smart city aspect of Milton Keynes.

But, I mean, even the structure of Milton Keynes itself is it's built along lay lines and where the, the sun rises at midsummer. So I think it's actually a really fascinating place. So it'd be great to research it more. Yeah, I'd love that.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. No, there are some incredible things about Milton Keynes, the concrete cows, and all the, sort of, robots that wander around delivering everyone's food, and driverless cars. There's so much actual innovation there. So that could be an amazing place to start.

But, but Carry, what you've done with the module is you've started somewhere completely different. And I think what Damon's been talking about is some of the things that show us how a place can actually be involved in so many other areas of the social sciences, for example, identity. So where does the module start then, Carry?

CARRY VAN LIESHOUT: So the module starts in Trafalgar Square. And we're going to use Trafalgar Square as a place where many kind of, different views of that place kind of come together. So we're looking at the multiplicity of place. For example, Trafalgar Square can be a place of tourism. It's a place of empire, representing empire. It's a place of protest, as well as many different views on what Trafalgar Square would mean to an individual.

KAREN FOLEY: We've asked people, in terms of their identities, some of the single most important factors that they would have for defining their identity. And top of the list here is where people were born. There's something there about place and meaning of a place that seems to be more important than, for example, where they live right now, or political, religious beliefs or things like occupation.

So there's something very meaningful about being in a particular place at a particular time. What do you both think about, then, when you think about Trafalgar Square? What images does it come up with for you, Carry?

CARRY VAN LIESHOUT: So for me, it's still very much a kind of place as a tourist, because that's the first way of how I encountered it. And even after working near Trafalgar Square for

about eight years and seeing it in many different ways, as well as a place for lunch or a place of protest, it's almost been a, kind of place I visit as a tourist first.

KAREN FOLEY: I used to work there, also, actually. And I often used to go round and look at all the tourists and see the amazement on their faces. And it always really - it made me really happy, because I think when I went to London, initially, it was one of the places I went to. And I could always see that joy in other people's eyes.

We've asked people at home what they think when they think of Trafalgar Square, and here's what they had to say about it. Things that are top of the list are obviously place. So this was something we'd identified as very important, London. But other sort of landmarks around that, things like Nelson's Column, for example, the statues, the National Gallery, it's the central hub of the UK.

But other important things are coming up here, Dave. And I wonder if you might like to pick up on some of these. Some things like the pigeons, which are very obvious, but other things, in terms of things like rights, and opinions, and history, about whether people agree or disagree about class. So there are other things that people are, sort of, talking about, aside from the very obvious landmarks. What does it mean to you, Dave?

DAVID HUMPHREYS: Well, yeah, I mean, it's a fascinating word cloud. There's some very interesting responses there. I mean, my first encounter with Trafalgar Square was way back in the 1960s when my parents would take my two sisters and I on a day visit to London every year.

It's an iconic place. It's recognisable to anyone who lives in the UK and those who visit London as tourists, as Carry was saying. It's overlooked to the north by the National Gallery, the home of artwork such as Constable's *The Hay Wain*. And to the east, it's overlooked by the South African Embassy, the site of many political protests during the apartheid era.

But the monument that dominates the Square, Nelson's Column is itself a celebration of an admiral who won a sea battle more than two hundred years ago. So I used to go there a lot when I was a PhD student at City University London. It's a place where - the Waterstone's Bookshop is one of my favourite places. But a lot of history converges on Trafalgar Square. It means different things to different people, as I think the word cloud shows.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely, absolutely. Damon, I know there's a lot of chat in the chat box here. Maybe you can tell us what people at home think, also.

DAMON MILLER: Yeah, there's a lot of chat about people's identities. So Sandra is saying that her identity comes from a multiplicity of roles rather than a place in itself. And Lisa was saying that she lives in a, in a small town, so her ancestors arrived there in the early eighteen hundreds. So she has a very deep, personal history with that location. So there's certainly a split, I think, between place and I guess space where people feel that they are at a particular time and where that identity is coming from.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. So there are all sorts of things here around the construction of identity, which is very, very subjective - has different meanings for different people. And I think,

you know, going back to that, sort of, discussion we were having about social research, really shows why it's so important to have so many different methods and able to, to capture some of these lived experiences that can be very different.

But returning to the module, then, Dave and Carry, this notion, then, of how identity can be constructed and some of the factors that are important link to things, like, for example, not only just identity, but also things like DNA, genetics, you know, to whom we are attached and belong, but also some more of the cultural aspects like colonialism and British identity, as well. We've been talking - earlier, you mentioned, Dave, that the module was made in the context of changing things with the pandemic, but also changing relationships internationally. How have those things had an impact? And what might students, then, sort of, pick up, in terms of the module, around those areas?

DAVID HUMPHREYS: Well, we've been very sensitive to the United Kingdom's changing position in the world as a result of Brexit. But we've also been very sensitive, and this will come through, in terms of how identity is constructed in bringing to the fore the role of colonialism in creating the United Kingdom that we know today.

So how was the United Kingdom constructed? How has it become the country it is today? And how will that affect this possible trajectories of change in the future?

When we consider the role of colonialism during the Industrial Revolution, just one example, the textile mills of Lancashire built during the Industrial Revolution led to Britain gaining a leading global role in producing cloth and clothes. But much of the cotton that was harvested for these mills, was - came from the Mississippi Valley of the United States by slave labour from West Africa. And this is missing in many accounts of Britain's industrial heritage.

So we bring that to the fore. We foreground that, and we, we talk about how it's made the country the United Kingdom as we know it today.

Another example is we interview Professor Corinne Fowler of the Colonial Countryside project. And she researched the role of imperialism in the making of British country houses. And she found that colonialism, including money earned from the activities of, say, the East India Company, generated much of the personal wealth to finance the construction of the country estates that we now consider to be British heritage in which we visit today.

And imperialisms also changed the natural environment in the United Kingdom. Many plant species from the colony were introduced to the United Kingdom during the colonial era. Just one example, rhododendrons from India. Mahogany that decorates the interiors of British country estates as wood panelling and furniture was felled by slave labour in, for example, Jamaica and South America, before being transported across the Atlantic to Europe. So we believe this module will leave students to have a more complete picture of the United Kingdom, of our past, how the country was made, and how this has shaped the changing geographies of the present.

KAREN FOLEY: So it's very much around that notion of these imagined identities and imagined construct of who we are, to whom we're attached, where we are, even. We asked people at home, do you think the UK will re-join the EU? Now, only twenty per cent of them said yes, they think

so. The majority of the view was no, they won't, with fifty-seven per cent of the audience saying that. So, so how then, Carry, might students gain an imagining of the UK, in terms of its borders, boundaries and place in the world?

CARRY VAN LIESHOUT: Well, this is one of the things in how the, the pandemic, kind of, made border suddenly more clear than it had been for a long time before. For example, Wales and England had different restrictions and different levels of that. So a border that normally would almost not be there at all suddenly became very obvious, and where people could go, and where they could not go.

Also I like how in this identity question, the things that came up for this landmarks and the idea of ancestry, because we have a chapter on that that's almost completely on the idea of how present identities often link to the past, either for landmarks that can be constructed in a way that's part of British identity or part of Scottish identity at the same time, and how people link back to the people who had been there for a long time. So how identities are constructed both on the past and present, often through places.

KAREN FOLEY: And you have different concepts which you explore in different weeks of study, things like assemblage and mobilities, including things like migration. But, but Dave, you also talk about the very important issue of territories and boundaries. And you mentioned earlier the effect that the pandemic has had on trade, even within the United Kingdom, as well. So, so what are some of the things that we might then pick up, in terms of those borders and their implications?

DAVID HUMPHREYS: Yes, I mean, as Carry was saying, the role of borders is important on the module. We do look at them in quite some depth. And the work we do on territory has got three organising concepts, the first is borders. And as Carry's been explaining, these, these borders within the United Kingdom have tended to harden somewhat. For example, between Scotland and England, and between England and Wales, and so on.

There's also the question of the border on the island of Ireland. And we're living through - the second concept that we look at is boundaries, both territorial boundaries, but also social boundaries, boundaries between groups of people based on race, ethnicity, gender and class.

And then finally, we look at openness, because Britain - no country in an island. Britain is open to the world. There's different types of mobility, migration, trade, financial services and so on, that cross national borders, and that help make the United Kingdom. And in turn, what that means, under globalisation, is that the United Kingdom helps to shape how other places are made.

So that's, that's how we look at territory and territorial formation, how it's made, national borders, boundaries both territorial and social and the concept of openness. I think the point on borders is, is fascinating, because, I mean, we're, we're now living through an era where it's possible that Scotland may become independent during the life of this module.

And that would lead to a number of political questions, including, for example on defence. I mean, Scotland, we can assume, would acquire a share of the UK's military assets such as fighter

aircrafts and naval ships. But the United Kingdom also keeps most of its nuclear-powered submarines it has laying in Scotland. So presumably, the remainder of the UK would either have to pay rent to Scotland to keep its submarines there or move them somewhere else.

So I think what we get from this, is that geographical change is happening all the time. Borders may soften and harden, as may boundaries. Places may be more or less open at certain historical junctures.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. We're nearly out of time, Dave. And there's so many exciting things that we're not going to have the opportunity to talk about. Emma's made a really important point. The future of the Union seems to be pretty relevant. She says, you know, what does it mean to be British?

And Peter says, John Donne, no man is an island. Each is part of the continent. So there are lots and lots of things here. But I wonder if I might end by asking you, Dave, about the role that this module plays within the overall qualification, because you're the qualification director, as well. So where does D255, sorry 225 fit in?

DAVID HUMPHREYS: OK, well, D225 is one of two second-level modules in the BA (Honours) in Geography. So students would first have to do two Level 1 modules. That's DD103 *Investigating the social world*, and U116 *Environment: journeys through a changing world*.

D225 will be one of the second-level modules. The other is DD213 *Environment and society*. A very fine module that's proving very popular with students. But then at Level 3, there are two modules again, DD319 *Environmental policy in an international context*, fondly known by its acronym EPIC, and D325, which we're currently making on Researching everyday geography.

So by the time students have completed this degree, they'll have an excellent grounding in human and environmental geography. Or they can count these modules like any OU module towards the open degree. So that's where the module fits in.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Well, that is wonderful. So exciting. Some really, really big issues. Unfortunately, we don't have time to take those discussions any further.

But I assure you that people will be keeping talking about some of these things in the chat throughout the day. Some really important things there to consider for us all. Dave and Carry, thank you so much for joining me to discuss that. A really exciting module. All the best with the first presentation of that.

We're going to now have a quick break. We're going to have a video about Seeing life through a lens: the age of image-making. And then I'm back to talk about understanding digital societies. So join me for that next exciting session very soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]