Conceptualising demand for flying:

the 'synthetic situation' of academic work

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We know we shouldn't fly so much…

- The economic cost - travel related and lost time (Bray, 2008; Salt and Wood, 2012)

- Risk and business continuity – the volcanic ash crisis (Budd et al., 2011)

- Social costs – work/life balance, stress, familial responsibilities (Espino et al., 2002; Middleton, 2008)

- Carbon: 3.5bn business trips by air globally for business each year

So why is change so difficult?
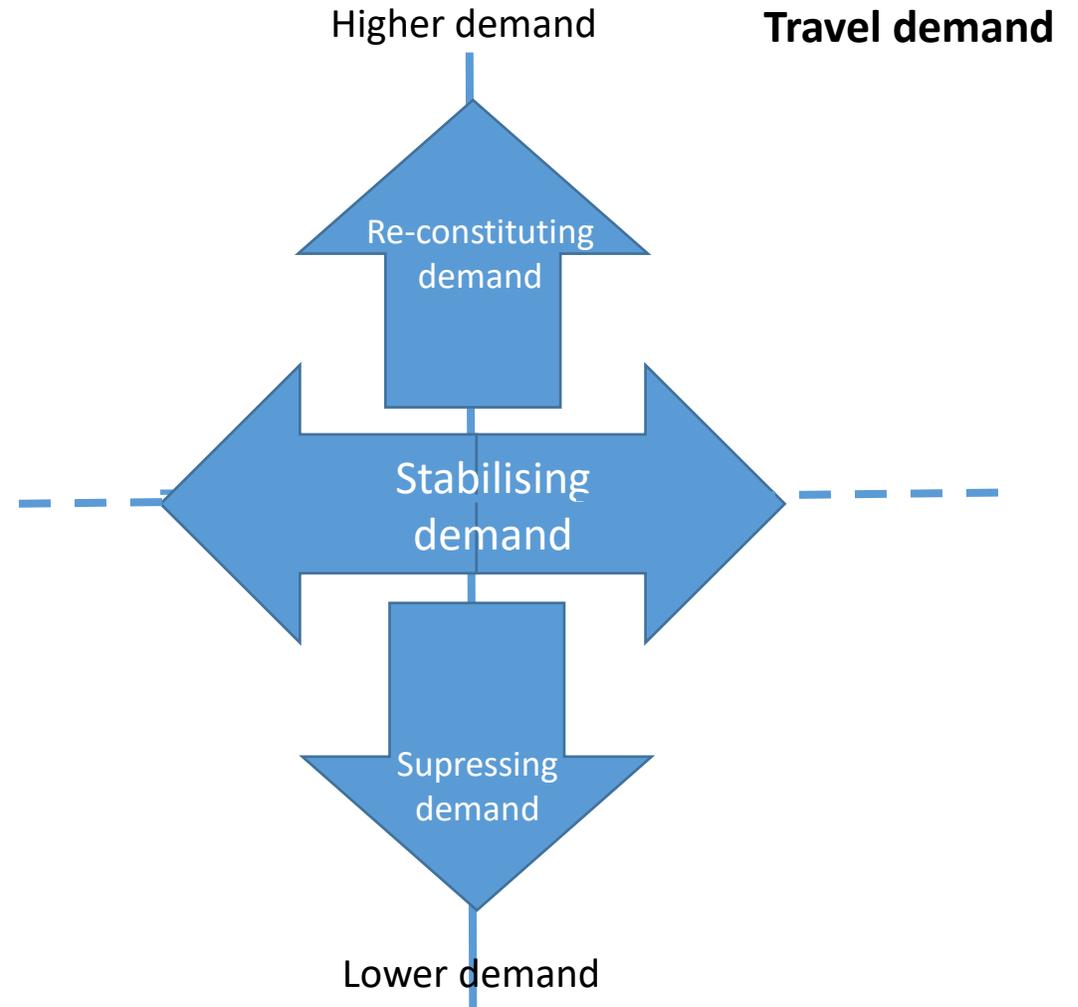
A STS inspired perspective

| **Practices**	**Synthetic situations**
Flying as a practice of **coordination**, entangled/bundled with other academic practices	The 'thing' we call academic work/life is a **fusion of the effects of travel & ICTs** on how we structure and value things in academia

Dynamic practices

Academia has changed a lot (discuss!)…

and in turn our work & mobility practices

Higher demand   **Travel demand**

Re-constituting
demand

Stabilising
demand

Supressing
demand

Lower demand

Storme et al (2017):

- Trips to conduct research (laboratories, libraries, observations)

- Transnational projects (and showing commitment to them)

- Ever-narrower fields of expertise; less co-located collaborators

- Meetings as sparse (happenchance) and dense (trusting) networks

Higher demand

Re-constituting demand

Lower demand
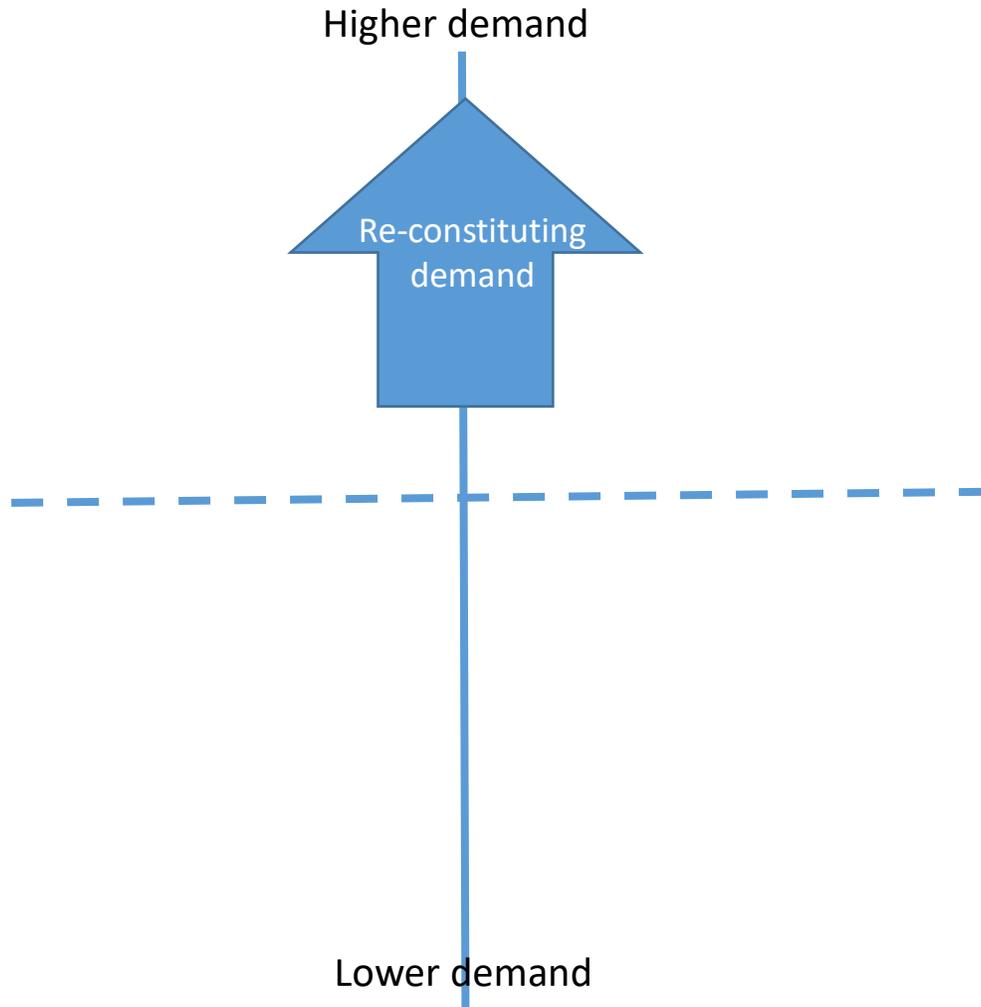
"It's on our, sort of, KPIs at senior management level, so visibility, being mobile, agility, geographical agility is in very much the KPIs of the senior management team, and that's cascaded down to staff of all levels, to be fair"

"My purpose in writing to you today is to be clear about the importance we attach to internal mobility...And remember, being mobile will undoubtedly open up opportunities for you to accelerate your career development too"

"Skype's brilliant, we rely on it all the time, it's a great tool. But even though technology has increased I think generally, in totality the level of communication on projects has increased in its, sort of, totality, you know..... So even though the use of Skype and everything has increased, the level of face to face meetings is still as significant as it was six, seven, eight years ago...So I suppose the total level of communication and interaction has gone up"

Travel, practices & coordination

- Interwoven timespaces and the coordination of practices (Schatzki, 2010)

Higher demand

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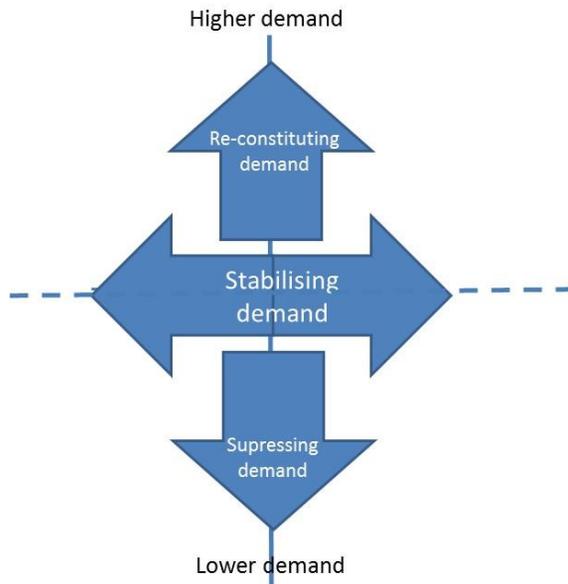
interpersonal structuring (shared ends, means, emotions)	chains of action (each actor following/reaction to another)
intentional directedness (when an actor is focussed on the actions and emotions of another)	medium of settings (connections between actors that give them shared lives, events and stimuli)

- Evolution in the "common, shared and *orchestrated* timespaces" associated with business practice (Schatzki, 2010: 71)
- Travel in an ecology with ICTs

So why is change so difficult?

Conclusion 1: academic practices coordinated by flying

We can understand this more by looking at the 'synthetic situation' of academic life…which might give clues about how to change

The synthetic situation

1. Travel, ICTs, academic work and universities are not 'discrete entities' - they coproduce one-another
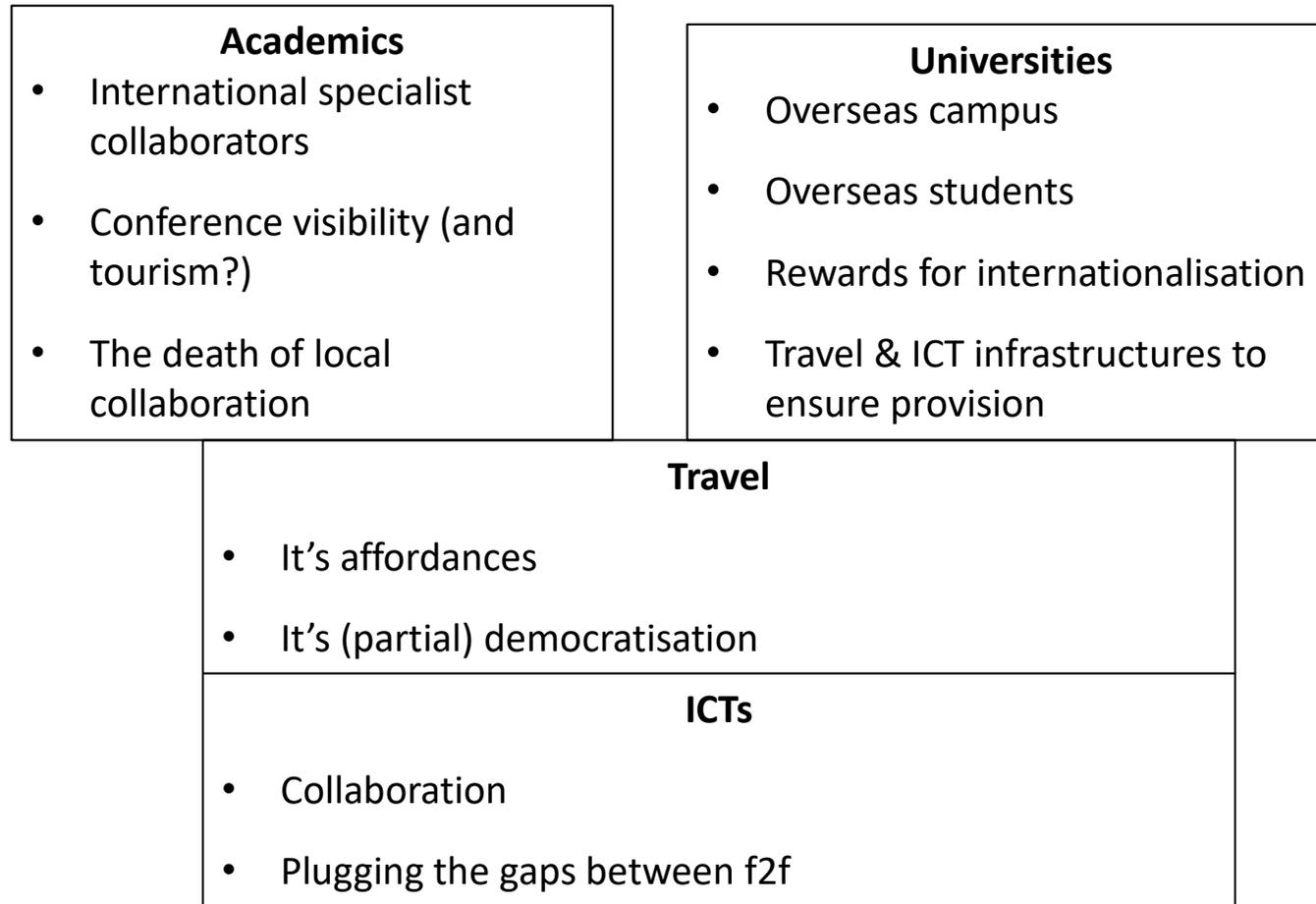
We need to move beyond "a deeply taken-for-granted assumption that technology, work, and organizations should be conceptualized separately" (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008: 454)

2. If we recognise that "the social and the material are constitutively entangled in everyday life" (Orlikowski, 2007: 1437)…

Then we see how academic life as a 'synthetic situation' emerges from the fusion of the agency of travel and ICTs that interacts with the agency of academics and university managers

3. This agency of travel and ICTs creates a synthetic situation structured around academics travelling, that is hard to unravel

To illustrate how the 'fundamental stuff' of academic life is entangled with travel:

Academics
- International specialist collaborators
- Conference visibility (and tourism?)
- The death of local collaboration

Universities
- Overseas campus
- Overseas students
- Rewards for internationalisation
- Travel & ICT infrastructures to ensure provision

Travel
- It's affordances
- It's (partial) democratisation

ICTs
- Collaboration
- Plugging the gaps between f2f

If we seek to reduce/remove travel:

Academics
- International specialist collaborators
- Conference visibility (and tourism?)
- The death of local collaboration

Universities
- Overseas campus
- Overseas students
- Rewards for internationalisation
- Travel & ICT infrastructures to ensure provision

ICTs
- Collaboration
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So why is change so difficult?

Conclusion 2: academic life is a synthetic situation with mobility at its heart

But...there is hope!

Rethink travel and its agency – by moving away from the 'travel as always possible' approach

The radical (desirable?)

- Close overseas campus

- Remove international dimensions from reward processes

- De-globalize….

The pragmatic

- Identify the coordination challenges

- Staff things differently (less flying faculty; local staff for key roles requiring meetings)

- Examine new ways of coordination digitally beyond the videoconference (think about how Facebook etc has led to the decline of car driving in the 17-25 age group)

i.e. – create new synthetic situations as travel and ICT exert agency in a different way

Conclusions – the re-engineering of the synthetic situation of academic life

- **Flying is embedded in academic life** – a synthetic situation that the agency of travel & ICT has produced

- **Change thus means fundamental re-engineering**: being 'smarter' and deciding to travel less is structurally difficult

- **Re-engineering means changing the agency of flying**: limits, costs and the creation of a new synthetic situation. **NOT ICT substitution!**