

## The Role of Institutional Leadership: Promoting Interdisciplinarity Beyond ‘Workarounds’

*Denise Cuthbert*  
Dean, School of Graduate Research  
RMIT University (Australia)

### **The Paradox of Interdisciplinarity**

Challenges for those seeking to engage in interdisciplinary research and research training lie in the gaps between ubiquitous rhetoric espousing the benefits of interdisciplinarity and the persistence of institutional (and governmental) structures, funding flows and cultures which reflect the primacy of disciplines. At best the latter fail adequately to recognise/reward/fund/support interdisciplinarity. At worst, they actively inhibit it. This has been described as the “paradox of interdisciplinarity” in the literature (Weingart 2000; Woelart & Millar 2013), and is well documented by scholars writing in the US, UK and Australian contexts.

The disciplines remain a powerful force in the organisation of knowledge. The structure of many—perhaps the majority—of universities reflects and further enshrines this disciplined organisation with the primary academic unit being the discipline-based or -bounded school or department. Promotion committees, grant funding (both internal and external), academies and other scholarly associations, and exercises such as research quality audit regimes, prevalent in higher education systems in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and elsewhere, are commonly organised in terms which privilege established disciplines and push to the margins emerging interdisciplinary fields (Gläser & Laudel 2007; Genoni & Haddow 2009). In both the UK and Australia, the classification of research fields for the purposes of research quality audits provides one example of the persistence of the disciplines. As strongly evinced in the Australian higher education sector (Bammer 2012), even in contexts in which the benefits of interdisciplinarity (for innovation and impact) are avowed and putatively supported by government, the hegemony of disciplines persists.

### **Workarounds**

Various “solutions” to this problem (or workarounds) have been developed with different degrees of success. A common approach in Australian higher education, evident in the pre-1980’s universities in which discipline silos are most evident, is the retro-fitting or over-laying of interdisciplinary programs, commonly called centres, onto or over the discipline-based school or department structure. In the HASS fields, this workaround emerged in the mid-1980’s as a response to the emergence of theoretically-driven new fields of studies which in many cases were not welcomed in the disciplinary-based departments which had fostered their emergence in other higher education sectors. A good example of this development is the growth of centres of cultural studies and comparative literature alongside traditional departments of English, which in many cases hunkered down to a more trenchant focus on “English” (to avoid the de-stabilising influence of continental theory) and “literary” texts (to exclude the range of texts which cultural studies sought to subject to analysis). Another example is the emergence of Centres for Women’s Studies which were established by feminist scholars from a range of disciplinary backgrounds—

these programs were sometimes “housed” within departments of history, English, or sociology, or developed as standalone centres. In either case, existence was precarious. Staffing was often managed on what became known as the “ladies auxiliary” model: feminist academics took on teaching duties in Women’s Studies in addition to heavy loads in their home departments. As with the Centres for Cultural Studies, the right to establish majors and hence pathways to graduate studies, and to enrol PhD candidates was hard fought and in some cases took over a decade.

In cases where flourishing centres established the funding flow through enrolments to establish their own staff base, promotion and career tracks for centre staff was also hard won. Promotion committees, dominated by discipline-based academics, were slow to acknowledge the journals in which interdisciplinary scholars published and that the work they undertook was sufficiently important to warrant advancement. For many working in interdisciplinary fields, the abiding sense is of needing to work *against the institution* in order to function, rather than being supported by it (Lamont et. al 2006).

### **We can do better than this...**

University leaders can and need to do more to promote interdisciplinary education and research, particularly research training.

- Mechanisms for joint appointments of staff (in disciplinary home departments and interdisciplinary centres) should be facilitated and monitored carefully to ensure that .5 +.5 doesn’t = 2.00.
- Interdisciplinary programs should have the capacity to appoint and second staff.
- Appointment and promotion committees should be open to achievements outside conventional disciplinary lines. Interdisciplinary scholars should have representation on such committees.
- Undergraduate programs need to be structured so as to enable interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary majors or study themes. Problem- or issues-based studies are ideal for this purpose and bring other learning benefits as well. This will ensure a flow-through of well-prepared candidates for interdisciplinary graduate research.
- Pathways to graduate studies need to be opened to students with backgrounds in a range of fields.
- Funding schemes specifically to support interdisciplinary curriculum initiatives and research activities need to be developed.
- University leaders should advocate for interdisciplinary studies with government research funding and auditing agencies. In the Australian example, FoR (Field of Research) codes need regular review to ensure they accurately capture emerging fields of research and concomitantly that the research of those in these fields is not per force downgraded due to inadequate classifications.
- University leaders should actively pursue collaborative research training programs with other institutions and the placement of research candidates in industry for part or the duration of their studies (as appropriate to the research program). Interdisciplinary breadth and expertise can be enhanced through collaboration.

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