

Engaging Academic Staff in the Supervision of Interdisciplinary Doctoral Degree Programmes in the UK: Turning Round the Super Tanker of Monodisciplinarity

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Some academic staff place themselves firmly in interdisciplinary spaces from the outset of their career, continuing with this commitment throughout their academic careers, challenging the status quo and dominant paradigms in their institutions and mentoring colleagues and PhD students as they go. Many more develop interdisciplinarity through the established disciplines, developing not only the knowledge and skills to do so but inheriting the established values and cultural norms of their mono-discipline. This begins with the socialisation process of their training—their doctoral degree.

There is a degree of safety for academic staff in terms of personal academic progression in supervising disciplinary-based doctoral degrees, mitigating any associated risks to the successful supervision and examination of a PhD student in a competitive environment. This has a self-reinforcing influence running contrary to interdisciplinarity. However, despite the risks and challenges associated with interdisciplinarity it can be argued that doctoral degree programs are exactly where the development of interdisciplinary research has the best opportunities. The beginning of the socialisation process begins in the doctoral cohort but requires the engagement and commitment of supervisors.

There are many challenges within the UK higher education context to fostering academic engagement with interdisciplinary supervision, many of which are historical and related to established norms for assessing research progress. Increasingly top-down drivers from the UK Research Councils and funding bodies like to see institutional strategies which address these challenges. This is evidenced through the recent Research-Council-funded development of Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs) and even more recently in Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs).

The competitive system for assessing the quality of research within Higher Education Institutions in the UK known previously as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and now the Research Excellence Framework (REF) informs the selective allocation of the funding bodies' grants for research. This is accepted across the UK as primarily a disciplinary-focused exercise and concerns have been repeatedly expressed by academics across the sector that this assessment was a disincentive to interdisciplinary research. In the RAE/REF submission system there is no clear place to submit interdisciplinary outputs and furthermore assessment panel members are selected because of their monodisciplinary expertise and often do not possess the interdisciplinary expertise to know how to assess it appropriately. The Higher Education Funding Council

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for England (HEFCE) attempted to address these concerns explicitly within the guidance to institutions for submissions to the Research Excellence Framework (2014) but it takes a long time to turn around a super-tanker of monodisciplinary research.

Within research intensive UK universities, the importance of the outcomes of the national assessment framework for the personal development of individual members of academic staff cannot be emphasised enough and despite attempts to address concerns about how and where to measure interdisciplinary research there is a persistent understanding that it is easier and safer to publish within, and submit to, single units of assessment. For doctoral education in the UK, this means that it is more likely that supervisors, subject to these competitive pressures, will encourage a disciplinary-focused PhD that will fit established spaces and pass on the norms of the disciplinary-focused education that they received themselves, thus reinforcing monodisciplinary. There remains a personal career risk for academics to enter interdisciplinary research spaces and structurally and procedurally there are barriers. A cursory review of published criteria for promotion for academic staff on the websites of UK Higher Education Institutions also reveals little or no reference to developing interdisciplinary research as an incentive for promotion.

Unlike the North American model, the British doctorate has traditionally been based on the assessment of a single thesis after a period of “apprenticeship” with little or no formal courses and no accumulation of credit. This approach has been significantly altered in recent years so that the UK is moving increasingly towards a more structured training environment with considerable reflection on how best to support the development of researchers and the next generation of academic staff able to compete in a globalised economy, supporting and furthering UK PLC. The focus of the doctorate as being a socialisation process for future academic staff within the disciplines has been eroded somewhat with the increased focus on the agenda for generic/transferable skills development that has grown since 2003 in response to the Robert’s Review.

The growth of graduate schools since 1994 in the UK has provided an organisational space for the changes to the British Doctorate and now in 2014 there will be new supervisors who have experienced the altered UK doctorate. This has taken considerable time and has required cultural change that is still ongoing. Research students are now more likely than ever before to engage with students from other disciplines within the new UK graduate school training space fostering the potential for establishing cross-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary conversations and ideas. As supervisors increasingly acknowledge that doctoral students need to be prepared for a career outside academia where disciplinary divides are not as relevant, the appetite to foster interdisciplinary activities increases.

Research students in the UK are now supervised typically by a team of at least two supervisors with opportunities for cross-disciplinary supervision and intellectual diversity within this model. However, the formation of supervisory teams with staff from different disciplinary cultures requires an additional level of personal commitment both from the academics concerned and their management teams. The examination of research students within the UK provides a significant additional challenge in accessing examiners with interdisciplinary expertise. However, as with supervision, once an academic is recognised to have interdisciplinary expertise then they are more likely to be invited to supervise and examine interdisciplinary research students.

The emergence of doctoral training centres (DTCs) funded by the Research Councils in the UK were intended as a mechanism for increasing capacity in interdisciplinary research activities in areas that were difficult to locate within a single discipline structure. The recent emergence of Doctoral Training Partnerships funded by the UK Research Councils provide significant encouragement to academics to engage more collaboratively with partners in the supervision of PhD students and engage in interdisciplinary programmes in collaboration with other universities. Doctoral Training Partnerships are now the main mechanism for the distribution of the UK Research Councils' postgraduate funding with an emphasis on encouraging interconnectivity across disciplines and across universities through the training of doctoral researchers. Engagement with the supervision of Research-Council-funded students carries prestige and will rather force academics to engage in doctoral degree programmes and training that foster interdisciplinarity.

Success in further encouraging academic staff to engage with interdisciplinary degree programmes within the UK will require further investment from individual institutions and the encouragement of bottom-up approaches linking personal success and progression to this agenda. This will require further cultural change (which takes time), explicit links to funding and research quality assessments and the continued development of doctoral training approaches equipped to mitigate the risks to supervisors and students.