

Short Interdisciplinary Guide 11

Exploring Interdisciplinary Careers



Becoming an interdisciplinary academic

Interdisciplinarity has become a cornerstone of research policy with many national and international funding schemes now supporting interdisciplinary research at various stages of the academic life course. Yet, young academic investigators/early career researchers receive very mixed messages about whether this is a desirable career choice (Lyall, forthcoming 2019). In most countries, doctoral training is still largely bound within disciplines and there are well-documented challenges to pursuing an academic career based on interdisciplinary research and teaching when the majority of reward and recognition systems are still single discipline based.

Despite trends towards interdisciplinarity that we have seen throughout the INTREPID project, the view persists that universities still prefer to employ discipline-based experts (Nelson, 2011) and that young academics seeking an interdisciplinary role risk losing job security (Rhoten and Parker, 2004).

Research has been likened to a “craft” where the process of acquiring research skills is a form of “apprenticeship”. We thus need to think of doctoral programmes not just as “training” in a particular knowledge base but as a process of “socialisation” where students learn about the cultural norms, language and behaviours through both the taught curriculum and research opportunities and also engagement with other researchers (Holley, 2015; Boden et al., 2011; Felt et al., 2012). Indeed, interdisciplinary scholars debate the extent to which an individual can “learn” to become interdisciplinary (Fam et al., 2017) and there is a widely held appreciation that this requires both the acquisition of an array of skills – often through “learning by doing” – and certain personality traits that predispose the individual to interdisciplinary (or transdisciplinary) aptitudes (Augsburg, 2014; Bruce et al., 2004).

The unique strength of interdisciplinarians is not therefore their knowledge of several disciplines but their more tacit, integrative skills. The doctoral experience is thus not simply about learning skills and facts and becoming an expert in a particular topic or technique, it is also about shaping the type of scholar you will become.

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Opportunities and challenges

With this in mind, the INTREPID team put together a workshop on “Exploring Interdisciplinary Careers” as part of the ITD Conference at the Leuphana University of Lüneburg, held on 11 September 2017. Through a series of three interrelated exercises, this workshop engaged with an audience of young (and perhaps not so young!) researchers and teachers to explore the rewards and challenges of following an interdisciplinary career path. We were able to identify a number of “mixed messages” sent by typical reward and recognition systems (in different institutions, in different countries) and both positive and negative factors at an institutional level, and implications for career progression strategies.

We were, of course, working with a highly motivated and self-selected group of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary (ITD) supporters who were able to cite a wide range of opportunities, with such research providing more holistic perspectives and a chance to explore in new and unconstrained ways. But even these ITD enthusiasts recognized that most universities are not well structured to support these types of careers. There were both epistemological challenges, such as the lack of research focus and direction that might ensue, but also very clear institutional barriers to such careers.

“Uncertainty” was a recurrent theme both in terms of career prospects but also uncertainty about how to frame their research profiles and achieve the right balance between the “specialized” and the “generalized”. Participants talked about the slow pace of change within institutions, a sense of “moving in circles” and feeling “pushed around” when they encountered institutional inertia and resistance to new perspectives and working practices.

