

7 ways to develop your skills with interdisciplinary study

King's Learning Institute

The second in a series of guides designed to help you get the most out of your studies and time at King's

1. Branch into a new field

Branching into new fields will develop your creativity, critical thinking and your CV. Interdisciplinary activity increases your listening skills, empathy for ethical and social issues as well as developing your perception of bias. You will gain critical skills that allow you to ask more sophisticated questions, as well as making new connections between ideas and evidence in contrasting fields that will help you to produce more sophisticated answers. Such skills will enhance your academic performance and your employability. Despite this, only 28% of King's students report that their course regularly encourages them to approach a topic from an alternative disciplinary perspective. A further 45% of students reported that this sometimes happens, and 23% of students state that they are never encouraged to use alternative disciplinary perspectives.

Get going: To branch into a new field opt for an interdisciplinary module on your programme, or begin a course outside your department. This could be through the Modern Language Centre or a King's Interdisciplinary Award. Check the criteria for the King's Undergraduate Research Fellowships offered by departments other than your own. If you have time between the end of exams and vacating your London accommodation, investigate activities and events that are available over the summer to expand your disciplinary horizons. For example, public lectures at King's and other London universities. Remember, London is our campus; check academic programmes of talks, workshops, festivals and exhibitions at institutions like the British Museum, British Library, National Theatre, British Film Institute, Southbank Centre, the Tate and National Galleries, Royal Institution, Royal Society and Royal Museums at Greenwich.

2. Question your own thought processes

When you begin working in groups that mix students from different Departments, be prepared to question your own thinking. Interdisciplinary working will help you to notice things that are easily taken for granted by particular disciplines. Course content that may appear obvious to some students, can be difficult for others because of

differences in disciplinary training. It takes time to accrue and form new ideas from various pieces of understanding, but this is at the heart of learning at King's. Currently, 89.5% of King's students report forming a new idea or understanding from various pieces of information. However, 9.5% of students report that they 'never' develop new ideas or understandings in this way.

Get going: Make sure you get the most from seminars and lectures. Reflect on how your ideas are challenged in lectures. In seminars, be ready to explain your thinking. This will train you to think more critically and deliberately about your own assumptions. Reflect on how your understanding is developing over the course of your studies. Attend lectures and research seminars outside your department to ensure you continue to challenge yourself with new ideas and approaches to knowledge.

3. Develop your communication skills

Conversations with students and academic staff from other fields can become an important part of your learning experience. Learning to convey complicated ideas is an important skill; many employers request evidence of 'excellent' verbal and written communication skills in job application packs. Interdisciplinary work requires communicating to different audiences across different subject areas. Developing your communication skills will assist your studies more generally.

Get going: Talk to students from other programmes and Departments about your studies and exchange ideas. Some societies actively encourage and test communication across backgrounds and disciplines (for example, the KCL Debating Society and Model United Nations Society which is committed to communicating, and resolving different viewpoints). Identify where your thoughts are similar and different. You may note regular sticking points and areas prone to mis-interpretation that you can then pre-empt. Be alert to your audience. These discussions will stand you in good stead when discussing your studies in job interviews.

4. Ask very specific questions

Questioning skills are a key part of the communication skills that are essential to interdisciplinary work and a useful career skill when moving into new employment. When you move into a new field you may struggle initially to understand concepts or clarify vocabulary that other students appear to take for granted. This is to be expected, so don't feel discouraged. However, do not quietly hope that you will catch up further down the line.

Get going: Be prepared to ask 'obvious' questions. Ask academics and other students to guide you through their reasoning. Identify the steps you don't understand and ask for these to be explained. Be sure to clarify unfamiliar vocabulary, text-structures and language choices as you go along. Use online glossaries to explore terms in greater depth. Make the most of formative assessment to resolve sticking points.

5. Apply new concepts and methods

Working in a new discipline introduces you to new concepts, methods and ways of approaching evidence. These are tools that can prove invaluable when working on your final year project or other applied and problem-based learning activities. Combining ideas from different courses during class discussions or when you complete assignments is an important way to develop interdisciplinary skills. At present, 84% of King's students 'often' or 'sometimes' combine ideas from different modules on assignments or in discussion. However, 11% of students report that they 'never' work this way.

Get going: Connect new concepts and methods to your project work. Get feedback from people outside your department to discover aspects of your studies that you might never have thought of. Offer your own suggestions and feedback in return. You won't be able to apply every theory or methodology that you discover, however, experimentation will add versatility to your skill set.

6. Use real-world scenarios in your work

Real-world social problems or issues can provide a great opportunity to test and apply diverse perspectives from different disciplines in a single task or assignment; they also offer a wealth of materials for exploration that cannot be found in a textbook or academic example. At King's, 41% of students already regularly connect their learning to social issues, with a further 38% stating that they sometimes connected their learning in this way. 16% of King's students report that they have never benefitted from this aspect of interdisciplinary working. Bringing different perspectives to bear in your studies will help to solve problems and answer questions that cannot be easily be addressed using a single method or approach.

Get going: Look for similarities between fields that appear radically different. Understanding and applying different perspectives in your studies will help you to break new ground. Use real-world cases in your project work and group discussions and consider how different disciplinary perspectives can suggest different approaches and resolutions to social issues. Remember, different disciplinary perspectives can also suggest similar resolutions for very different reasons.

7. Be brave

It can be daunting entering a new field; you may feel as though teaching moves too quickly. Do not be discouraged. Trying anything new is difficult, but throwing yourself into an alternative way of thinking can be particularly challenging.

Get going: Prepare to work outside your comfort zone. Adapt your learning strategies to incorporate new questioning styles and more active participation. Seek learning experiences outside the classroom that are unstructured. You may have to make sense of diverse resources using new methods. Focus on becoming a better listener and learner. Perseverance will bring rewards if you can stick with it!

Find out more

King's Experience Interdisciplinary Award
www.kcl.ac.uk/interdisciplinary-awards

Modern Language Centre
www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/mlc/index.aspx

King's Undergraduate Research Fellowship
www.kcl.ac.uk/ugrad-research-fellowship

KCL Model UN
www.kclsu.org/organisation/ModelUN

KCL Debating Society
www.kcldebating.org

Further Reading

Newell, W. H. (2009). *Interdisciplinarity in undergraduate general education*. In R. Frodeman, J. T. Klein and C.

Micham (Eds.) *The Oxford handbook on interdisciplinarity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This briefing is one of a series of KLI Quick Guides focussed on enhancing your student experience at King's. More guides can be found at www.kcl.ac.uk/kings-quickguides

Guides are updated during the academic year. If you have comments or contributions to make, please contact kli@kcl.ac.uk