Institutionalising Interdisciplinary Work in Australia and the UK

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Outline of presentation

- Background and framework
- Methodology
- Findings
- Conclusions
- Future research
Background

As both teaching and research are increasingly interdisciplinary, how do universities successfully lead and manage this complex process?

• Effective collaborative relationships hard to establish
• Structural problems to surmount
• Socio-cultural and epistemological differences
Forms and practices of disciplinarity

• basic characteristics
• shared theories or ideologies
• common techniques
• socio-cultural characteristics (Becher, 1990)
A discipline

“any comparatively self-contained and isolated domain of human experience which possesses its own community of experts”

(Nissani, 1997)

Knowledge, methodology, community
Interdisciplinarity

“a means of solving problems and answering questions that cannot be satisfactorily addressed using single methods or approaches”

(Klein, 1990)

Requires integration
Issues in interdisciplinary work

• recruitment
• motivation
• communication
• reward systems
• management
Framework of the study

This study adopts Jarzabkowski’s (2005) activity-based strategy as practice method.
Methodology

• Literature review
• Ten in-depth semi-structured interviews of interdisciplinary leaders at KCL and Melbourne
• Appreciative inquiry
  • why engage?
  • what works?
  • principles for effective practice
Findings: Accounting for time

“the day to day running of teaching loads, and so those of us with split appointments are actually doing in excess of what we should be doing, and there’s a double load of meetings”
Findings: Computer identity

“the whole thing is run on a computer system that only sees you having one identity”
Findings: Restructuring

“So what I’ve done is I’ve reorganised the way the single disciplines are taught, so that students can take the most productive combination. So that the students will start to see the links, even if some of the staff don’t. So, simple timetabling and setting priorities can assist me”
Findings: E-management

“Our new school was not formally constituted until about three weeks ago. We’re trying to run this big interdisciplinary subject with, you know, very complicated teaching arrangements, and tutorials and payments and so on. The manager of the school did not have access to [the computer system] until halfway through the semester, and to do that she had to sign on as a temporary staff member, even though she’s been here for 34 years”
Findings: Administration

“As far as working cross faculty is concerned, never mind cross discipline, cross faculty, in the end, it is probably not the ideas, which need to be fine tuned, but it is the administrative processes, which make it easier to collaborate. Like mutual recognition of subjects, perhaps of carrying double numbers, call [course] numbers, as it were”
Findings: Logistics

“I keep being asked for some, please explain again, sort of things. Why do you need laboratory chairs, for instance? Well, we actually have a laboratory and lab benches [laughs] and, you know, so we need them”
System level - funding

• Difficulties writing interdisciplinary grants
• Fitting interdisciplinary work into national assessment schemes (RAE in UK)
• Challenges of aligning interdisciplinary work with national funding councils
Institution level - recognition

Issues with traditional discipline-based reward systems:

- mode of publication: e.g. government report rather than journal article or book
- location of publication: generalist rather than specialist journal
- time frame: interdisciplinary work takes time to develop
- publication in peer-reviewed journals using unfamiliar literatures

A risky business best left till later?
Institutional level: IR

- Computer systems often lock staff into one school or department
- Issues with accurately counting teaching loads across faculties/schools
- Accounting for primary, secondary, tertiary identities on campus (offices, addresses, budgeting)
Faculty, school, department level

• Tribal academic disciplines
• Administrative issues:
  • finance
  • course registration
  • time-tabling
  • computer systems

“It is quite difficult to teach interdisciplinary courses … with different timetables, for instance, or different habits, different expectations, different cultures, perhaps of contact, or different entry level requirements.”
Conclusions: Challenges

• Interdisciplinary work challenged by practices
  • lack of culture of going outside one’s own department
  • current academic fads and trends
  • budget crunches

• Administration often organised on disciplinary and departmental lines
  • financial and prestige awards
  • course scheduling
  • computer systems
Conclusions: Promoting interdisciplinary work

• Promotion and tenure criteria important for early career academics
• Linking academics with similar interests
  • Internal research databases
  • “Find an Expert”
• Ability to go sideways in the university and maintain status is crucial for all academics
Future directions

Questions for university staff, including administrators, academics and those in leadership positions include:

• How can researchers recode, reclassify and reorganise departments, divisions and centres to promote interdisciplinary working within existing university structures?
• Are there new methods of accounting for and allocating faculty time, including research points, teaching loads, and university service commitments?
• What can be done on campus and electronically to connect researchers across the university?
• How can faculty members be keyed into databases to reflect their positions, including multiple appointments in departments, research centres, schools and faculties?
• How can interdisciplinary teaching be promoted throughout the university, including faculty reimbursement, time-tableing, cross-listing courses, and requirements from students?
Future directions

• Communities of best practice
  • Consortium of 10 universities in the US
  • Meeting of group of London universities
  • University-wide symposia at KCL

• Research groups
  • Administrative issues
  • Academic issues
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References


Questions?

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Thank you!