



From Pre-Established “Packages”
to Exploring and Enabling New Connections:
Individualizing Interdisciplinary Programs in (Northern) Europe

Kirsi Cheas¹ & Harri Kettunen²

2025 Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching Conference
London School of Economics
April 10, 2025

¹ University of Vaasa & Finterdis ² University of Helsinki & Finterdis



Kirsi Cheas

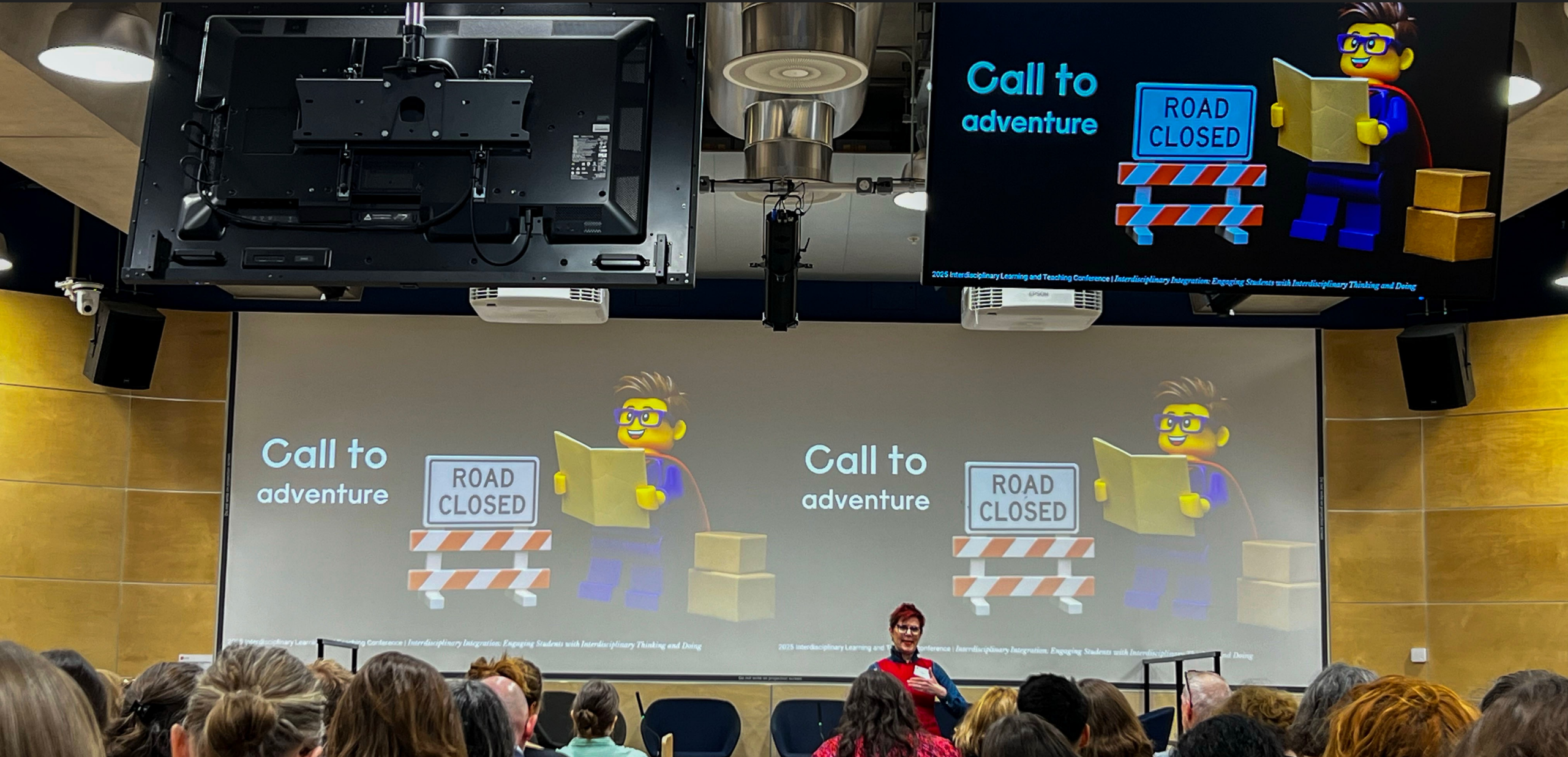
- PhD, Latin American Studies, Univ. of Helsinki (2018)
- Postdoctoral grant researcher, Univ. of Vaasa
- Board member of the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies
- Founding member & president of Finterdis – The Finnish Interdisciplinary Society
- Interdisciplinary researcher focusing on collaborative investigative journalism across the U.S.–Mexico border (Lat.Am. Studies, media studies, anthropology, sociology)

Background



Harri Kettunen

- Adjunct Professor of Latin American Studies, Univ. of Helsinki
- Coordinator of the Helsinki Term Bank for the Arts and Sciences
- President of the European Association of Mayanists, Wayeb
- Founding member of Teachers' Academy, Univ. of Helsinki
- Founding member and board member of Finterdis – The Finnish Interdisciplinary Society
- Interdisciplinary researcher combining anthropology, archaeology, art history, codicology, epigraphy, ethnobiology, history & linguistics



Elaine Brown (Anglia Ruskin University), Keynote: *The Hero's Curriculum: Born from Rebellion, Built on Purpose*
Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching Conference 2025: Interdisciplinary Experiences: Engaging Students
with Interdisciplinary Thinking and Doing; London School of Economics, April 10, 2025

Kirsi's PhD struggle at the University of Helsinki

“DOCTORAL PROGRAMME IN POLITICAL, SOCIETAL, AND REGIONAL CHANGES

The Doctoral Programme in Political, Societal and Regional Changes (PSRC) includes multidisciplinary research units crossing various faculties in area and cultural studies (Asian studies, **Latin American Studies**, Middle Eastern Studies, North American Studies, Nordic, European, Russian and Eurasian studies), consumer economics, global development studies, economic and social history, human geography, political history and political science.”

“DOCTORAL PROGRAM IN SOCIAL SCIENCES:

The doctoral programme offers high-quality doctoral training in the areas of **media and communication studies**, social and cultural anthropology, social psychology, social and public policy, social work, sociology, social data science and criminology.”

➤ **Research topic: How international news contextualizes coverage about complex realities in Latin America**

➤ **Most relevant fields: Latin American Studies + Media and Communication Studies**

- **Pertain to different programmes (“packages”)**
- **These packages cannot be combined**

TAIGA

(Teachers' Academy Interdisciplinarity
Group, University of Helsinki)



“On Interdisciplinary Paths: Experiences of
Supervising and Evaluating Interdisciplinary Theses”

On the Challenges of Supervising and Evaluating Interdisciplinary Theses



Maijaliisa Erkkola
Professor of
Human Nutrition



Harri Kettunen
Adjunct Professor of
Latin American Studies



Mika Rekola
University Lecturer
of Forest Sciences



Päivi Salmesvuori
Professor of Church History

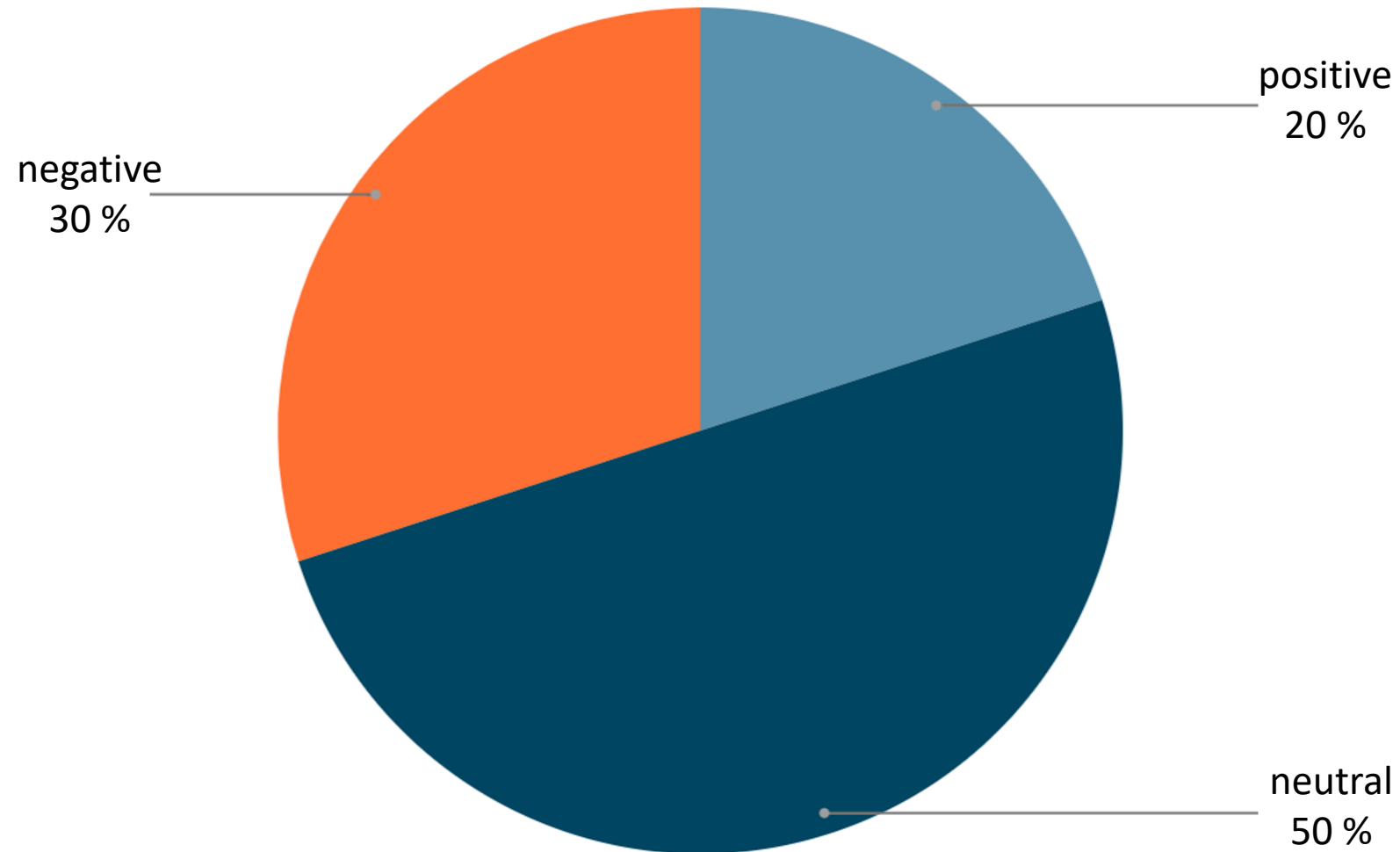


Anna-Maija Virtala
Adjunct Professor of
Veterinary Epidemiology



Risto Willamo
Adjunct Professor of
Environmental and
Sustainability Sciences

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN SUPERVISION AND EVALUATION INTERDISCIPLINARY THESES



QUOTES FROM OUR SURVEY (students)

“There was little support and encouragement from my own subject”

“Oma oppiaine ei juurikaan tukenut ja kannustanut”

“[...] our programme [...] has a very negative attitude towards interdisciplinary theses”

“[...] koulutusohjelmassamme [...] suhtaudutaan hyvin kielteisesti tieteidenvälisten tutkielmien tekoon”

“I felt that crossdisciplinarity had a negative impact on my grade”

“Koin poikkitieteellisyyden vaikuttaneen arvosanaani negatiivisesti”

QUOTES FROM OUR SURVEY (students)

“The experience was positive and very instructive in every respect”

“Kokemus oli kaikin puolin positiivinen ja erittäin opettavainen”

“Positive attitude, appreciating and emphasising interdisciplinarity”

“Positiivinen ja tieteidenvälisyyttä arvostava ja korostava asenne”

“I worked well with my supervisor and received a lot of support throughout the whole process”

“Ohjaajani kanssa työn tekeminen sujui hyvin ja sain paljon tukea koko tekoprosessin ajan”

Six major themes in the responses:

1. Interdisciplinarity is important to the supervision and assessment of theses; it should be **openly encouraged**, and efforts should be made to create a tradition of interdisciplinarity.
2. Importance of **cooperation** and of **lowering barriers** at all levels: faculties, disciplines and subjects, supervisors, assessors and students.
3. Desire for **pedagogical coherence** in guidance and assessment and the need to clarify the criteria for assessing interdisciplinary theses.
4. Sufficient **time** should be given for refining the research focus of interdisciplinary theses at the beginning of the research process.
5. Understanding the **supervisors' positions** and the resulting constraints.
6. **Workload, stress** and **available resources**.

“The general impression is that interdisciplinarity is a risky business: in principle, it is met with interest, but you are pretty much on your own to succeed or fail. In any case, this is the most meaningful way for me to do research, and I am glad to have been given the opportunity [...]”

”Yleisvaikutelma on, että on riskibisnestä: siihen suhtaudutaan periaatteessa kiinnostuksella mtieteidenvälisyydestä aika yksin saa onnistua tai epäonnistua. Joka tapauksessa tämä on itselleni se mielekkäin tapa tehdä tutkimusta, ja olen iloinen, että minulle on annettu siihen mahdollisuus [...]” (V42)

“In my experience, there is a very great need in society for interdisciplinary skills, and universities should respond to this need by producing multisectoral skills, and not by unnecessarily restricting the development of interdisciplinary skills, for example, through too narrowly defined degree requirements and degrees that produce the same kind of bulk. Putting individual strengths together in meaningful packages produces better qualifications for the needs of the society than rigidly predetermined course lists.”

“Kokemukseni mukaan yhteiskunnassa on erittäin suuri tarve tieteidenväliselle osaamiselle, ja yliopistojen tulisi vastata tähän tarpeeseen tuottamalla monialaisia osaajia eikä tarpeettomasti rajoittamalla tieteidenvälisen osaamisen kehittymistä esimerkiksi liian tiukasti rajatuilla tutkintovaatimuksilla ja putkitutkinnoilla, jotka tuottavat täysin samanlaista bulkkia. Yksilöllisten vahvuuksien koostaminen mielekkäiksi kokonaisuuksiksi tuottaa työelämän tarpeisiin parempia tutkintoja kuin tiukasti ennalta määrätyt kurssilistat.” (OA119)

Kirsi's PhD struggle at the University of Helsinki

“DOCTORAL PROGRAMME IN POLITICAL, SOCIETAL, AND REGIONAL CHANGES

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“Union street”

Latin American Studies
(Faculty of Arts)

Media and
Communication Studies
(Faculty of Social Sciences)

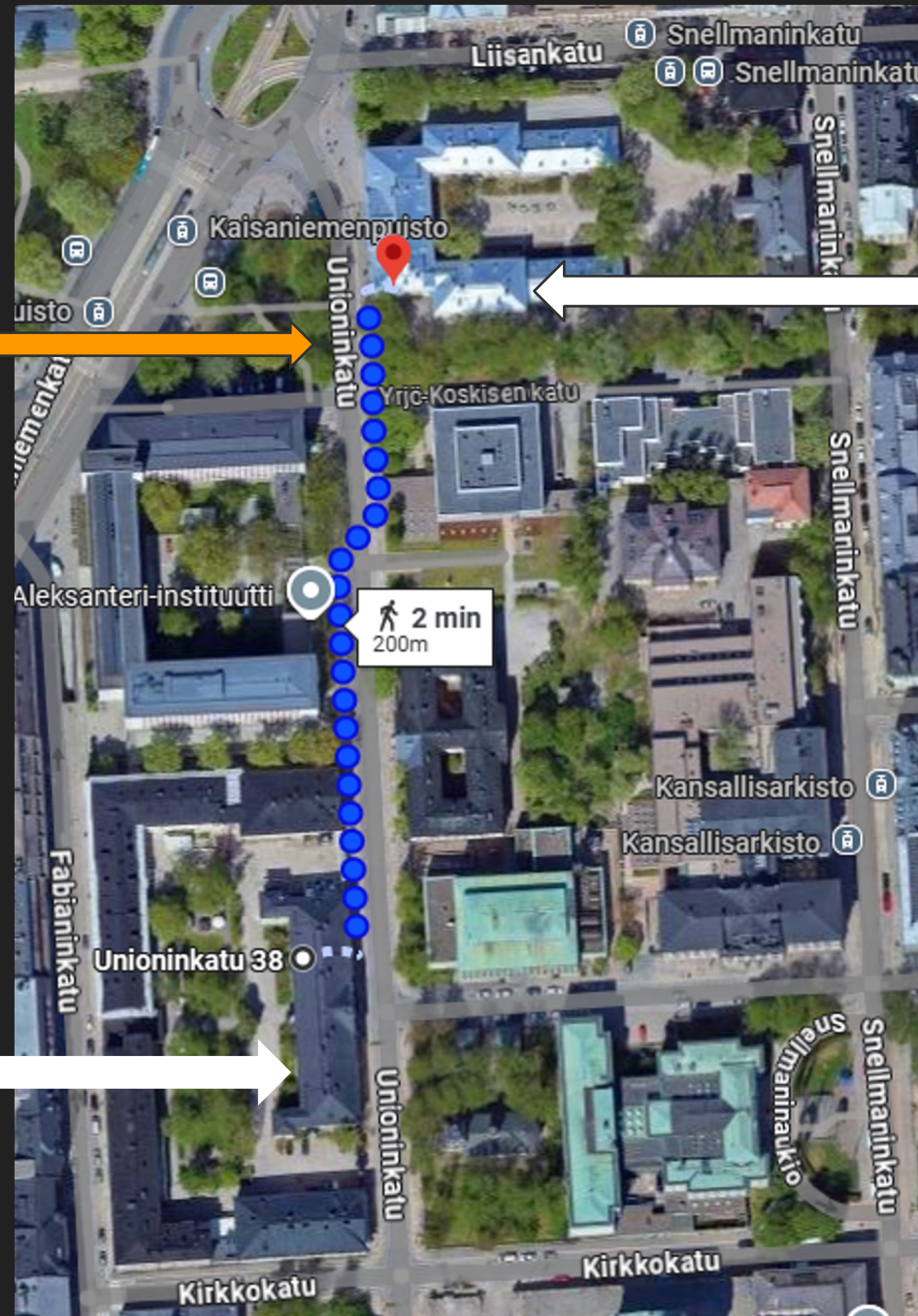


Image: Screenshot from Google Maps

Despite being only a 2-min walk and across from each other on “Union street,” these fields could not be united in my doctoral study due to “administrative challenges...”

➡ From “Union Street” in Helsinki to Union Square in New York City:
Visiting scholar at New York University (Dpt. of Media, Culture, and Communication) 2013-14, 2021-23



Photo: Kirsi Cheas



NYU Gallatin School for Individualized Study

“The cornerstone of the NYU Gallatin School is its individualized approach to education. Gallatin puts the individual student first. With the support and guidance of faculty advisers, students design unique courses of study, exploring multiple disciplines or various perspectives on specific areas of study not available in traditional departments.”

<https://gallatin.nyu.edu/>

Similar programs in other universities in NY, e.g.:

CITY UNIVERSITY
OF NEW YORK

THE
GRADUATE
CENTER

Individualized Studies Application Process

What is Individualized Studies?

Individualized Studies within the M.A. in Liberal Studies (MALS) program allows students to design their own interdisciplinary concentration when an existing one does not align with their academic interests. It provides flexibility for students to explore emerging fields, such as digital humanities or refugee studies, by working closely with faculty to shape their coursework.

Who is Individualized Studies For?

This concentration is for MALS students who have identified a unique area of study that is not currently offered within the program's existing concentrations. It is designed for students who seek an interdisciplinary approach and want to tailor their education to align with evolving academic and professional interests. Only admitted MALS students can propose an individualized concentration.

Eligibility

- Must be an enrolled MALS student (prospective students cannot apply).
- Combines courses across disciplines to create a unique MALS concentration.
- Work with a faculty advisor to develop an interdisciplinary concentration.

Students can apply for Individualized Studies at any point throughout the program

All resources

RIT
Rochester Institute
of Technology

School of Individualized Study

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What is Individualized Study?

Individualized study is all about you. It's focused on your interests, your passions, and your career goals. And, it's an opportunity for you to create a degree that's tailored around the knowledge and skills you want to learn, and that fit your personal ambitions.


About Individualized Studies

The individualized studies program provides students with a vehicle to design their own unique programs of study. The program allows students to investigate a theme, an issue, a problem, or a particular career interest and to formulate a specific curriculum accordingly. Individualized studies provides appreciable academic advisement so that students can integrate and synthesize several academic fields.

Students may combine any two compatible minor programs or develop their own programs of study by drawing upon the offerings of two to four different academic fields. Students in both tracks complete all college-wide degree expectations: the Intellectual Foundations requirements and unrestricted electives. Both tracks require a senior-level integrating research project as a culminating degree experience.

Individualized Studies, B.S. >

... and elsewhere – and all over – the U.S., e.g.:



INDIVIDUALIZED STUDIES
UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON

DESIGN YOUR OWN MAJOR

ADVISING

SENIOR STUDY

FORMS AND HANDOUTS

QUESTIONS

HOME >

DESIGN YOUR OWN MAJOR

An Individualized Studies major is a special interdisciplinary major designed by an individual student. Each Individualized Studies program is unique.

A university education is about learning to ask and answer complex questions. The Individualized Studies program allows highly motivated and self-directed students to pursue the questions about which they are most passionate when those questions cannot be pursued in current UW programs. Individualized Studies students epitomize the intentional intellectual engagement at the core of a great liberal education: focused, rigorous, disciplinary learning, even when integrating multiple disciplines.

The Individualized Studies program is not a means to vocational or applied versions of existing degrees; nor does it provide a secondary alternative to (or a light version of) existing majors. It is, instead, a place for intellectually curious, reflective, and highly self-directed students who embrace learning for its own sake. This program is not a place to simply get a degree; this is a place to pursue deep learning.




INDIVIDUALIZED STUDIES (BS)



INDIVIDUALIZED STUDIES (BS)

Chart your own course



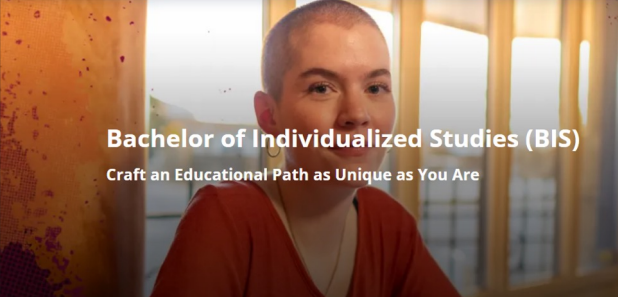
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Certificates

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Course Guide

Individualized Studies

Individualized Studies BAAS Concentration



About the individualized concentration

The Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences is designed to meet your unique needs—including the ability to design your own degree concentration to develop the knowledge and skills you need to fulfill your life goals and career ambitions. While most BAAS degree concentrations are interdisciplinary, combining areas of study to encourage greater complexity and flexibility as you explore your interests, the Individualized Studies concentration goes a step further. With input from your academic advisor, you can combine courses from two or three certificates or course blocks for a highly personalized learning experience.

APPLY TO THE BAAS TODAY

Fall 1 deadline is July 1!


Start your application now


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THE  TIMES

Individualizing Interdisciplinary Studies in Finland

Idea/goal: Establishing an interdisciplinary “Individualized Studies” program in Finland, inspired by similar programs abroad:

- To support unique career paths of undergraduate and graduate students
 - Particularly for those students who don’t wish to select a predefined interdisciplinary programme/“box”
 - Giving them an empty box instead that they can fill according to their particular interests
 - To support faculty who supervise students with an individualized approach
 - Facilitating supervision collaboration between fields, institutions, and people who have previously not worked together
 - This way the students’ ideas can also lead to new networks within and across institutions
 - To support faculty who integrate ideas and fields in novel ways in their own work
 - To encourage independent out-of-the-box thinking
 - To prevent interdisciplinary fields from turning into new disciplines characterized by gate-keeping (i.e. pre-defined boxes with limits accessible to pre-defined communities of practice)



Current stage: Preparing a funding proposal for a pilot project at the University of Oulu, Finland!

AIS Conference in Oulu, Finland in June 2025: Fostering an environment where interdisciplinary scholars from Finland, the U.S., and around the world can come together to share their best practices, challenges, and learn from one another.

[Home](#) [Registration](#) [Program](#) [Sessions](#) [Plenaries](#) [Keynote speakers](#) [Side events](#) [Travel information](#) [Get to know Oulu](#)

The 47th Association for Interdisciplinary Studies Conference:

Shaping the future in the era of polycrisis

June 4-6, 2025 · Oulu, Finland

#ais2025

The 47th Association for Interdisciplinary Studies Conference:
Shaping the Future in the Era of Polycrisis
June 4-6, 2025, Oulu, Finland

The University of Oulu and Oulu University of Applied Sciences are hosting the 47th Association for Interdisciplinary Studies Conference at the Linnanmaa campus from June 4th to 6th, 2025. This marks the second time the AIS organization has held its conference in Europe, following the 2019 event at the University of Amsterdam.

The conference will focus on the theme "Shaping the Future in the Era of Polycrisis" and it is intended for all those interested in multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary research and teaching at all stages of their research career and in all staff groups.

[REGISTER HERE](#)

ASSOCIATION FOR
INTERDISCIPLINARY
STUDIES

OAMK
OULU UNIVERSITY OF
APPLIED SCIENCES

OULUN
YLIOPISTO

oulu.fi/ais2025

Thank you!

interdisciplinary

Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching UK

**LSE100 &
Eden Centre**



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■





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