

# From Review to Opportunity:

Expanding Interdisciplinary Curricula and Practice in  
Higher Education

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# Interdisciplinary Curricula and Practice in HE

## Locating the challenge

### **Interdisciplinarity in HE teaching and learning**

**Interdisciplinarity:** increasingly positioned as essential to addressing complex social, environmental, and economic challenges, and as a topic that can be taught, including standalone interdisciplinary programmes

**Challenge:** there remains limited clarity about how interdisciplinary engagement is introduced, sustained, and developed across learners' educational journeys

**Our research:** examines the pathways for interdisciplinary learning activity within higher education

**Methods:** a critical review of interdisciplinary curricula and practice, drawing on a case study of the OU, a large, open access university with a longstanding tradition of multidisciplinary provision

*Case study approach:* Secondary data and empirical enquiry.

# Interdisciplinarity: Key Terms

## Case Study Methodology: defining the field

These terms may be initially viewed as interchangeable, but each has specific parameters.

Inter-disciplinary

Multi-disciplinary

Trans-disciplinary

Pan-disciplinary

Cross-disciplinary

(Joint/Combined)

Purpose: Seeking a baseline, consistent use of terms, exploring fundamental questions.

# Interdisciplinary Terminology



## **Disciplines/Disciplinary/ Disciplinarity**

- Named fields of knowledge/study
- Each discipline will have its own standardised expectations (style and methods)
- Some scholars may assert that their subject/field of study is inherently interdisciplinary in nature
- Operating in silos

## **Interdisciplinarity/Interdisciplinary**

- Collaborative, combining methods and/or frameworks from more than one discipline
- Underpinned by clear synthesis
- Not necessarily about integrating academic subject knowledge, may be about integrating methods
- A response to problem-solving, created by need

## **Multi-disciplinarity/Multidisciplinary/Cross-disciplinarity**

- An aligned but not integrated approach
- Academic disciplines used within problem solving approaches maintain their own methods
- Parallel findings used to inform a topic
- Outcomes may not necessarily be collaborative

## **Trans-disciplinarity/Transdisciplinary**

- An integration of approaches, not rooted solely in academic disciplinary areas
- Collaborative
- Co-creation methods using wider stakeholders from non-academic arenas

# The Current HE Landscape

Locating the space for interdisciplinary learning

## Headlines

- Higher Education in the UK is in a challenging position
- Reduced funding, reduced student numbers, staffing restructures/redundancies
- Continued interest in diversifying provision
- Highly competitive market
- Subtle differences at national levels (England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland) but overall similarities

# Headline Findings

## Challenge and potential

### **Initial analysis highlights:**

- Many explicitly interdisciplinary programmes are small-scale, elite, and primarily targeted at (highly able) school-leavers
- Opportunities for sustained interdisciplinary engagement within lifelong and flexible learning pathways remain underdeveloped.

# Competitors: explicitly interdisciplinary programmes

(Undergraduate and postgraduate provision)

## Student demographics

- Structures may appeal to non-traditional students, or those who may struggle in traditional HE “classroom” environments
- However, this does not appear to be the target market
- Challenging to find any targeted materials regarding “traditional” and “non-traditional” students
- Entry requirements, even when deemed to be flexible and inclusive, are targeted at highly able students
- Selling points prominent on marketing materials but difficult to obtain testimonial information from alumni (specific to the programmes)

# High level positioning

Interdisciplinary learning versus interdisciplinary practice

## **It appears that there is no standardised approach underpinning interdisciplinary studies**

Programmes include a range of approaches:

- Explicit introductory modules relating to understanding interdisciplinarity
- Interdisciplinarity principles built into each module
- Explicitly interdisciplinary modules, without subject specificity
- Explicitly interdisciplinary modules, but subject-area rooted
- Is interdisciplinarity assessed as a skill, or assessed as the understanding of it as a principle?

# Identifying existing interdisciplinarity at The OU

## Portfolio review

### **Interdisciplinarity at module level:**

- Explicit introductory modules relating to understanding the concepts of interdisciplinarity
- Interdisciplinarity principles embedded into a module
- Explicitly interdisciplinary modules, without subject specificity
- Explicitly interdisciplinary modules, but subject rooted

### **There are multiple entry points for interdisciplinary activity across the learning lifecycle:**

- early undergraduate “orientation” modules
- explicitly interdisciplinary projects embedded within disciplinary study
- later stage opportunities that draw on learners’ professional and experiential knowledge

# Precautionary stance

## Concluding observations

Against the background stance in which the value of interdisciplinary studies is accepted, we encourage the following approaches:

- Being wary of “doing” interdisciplinarity without a robust grounding
- Ensuring consistent understanding, using shared definitions and parameters
- Reviewing existing provision before moving to reinvention
- Exploration of existing interdisciplinary curricular subject areas and their strength/characteristics
- Engagement with interested academics
- Consideration of the target market and their particular needs, in relation to interdisciplinary curricular activity

# Thank you



**The Open  
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