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Multidisciplinary and Interdisciplinary Approaches in Higher Education

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Abstract

Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary education, research, and collaboration constitute essential dimensions in responding to contemporary societal demands and professional expectations within higher education. Explicitly defined as articulated in policy documents of many institutions of higher education and government agencies, local and global developments in scientific teaching and curricula development, relevant social circumstances, workforce changes, and documenting the role of these collaborative approaches in achieving wide-ranging institutional objectives and fruitful contributions to society justify the relevance and importance of the issues being addressed. Multidisciplinary education and collaboration has focused on three semi-structured thematic areas where these practices are applied, representing policy discourse, teaching–learning–curriculum structures, and relevant scholarly debates. Investigating these topics has prompted the exploration of five questions defining the practicum: global, international, and local dimensions of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches in higher education; historical trajectory, arrangements, and changes influencing the adoption of cross-disciplinary policies and curricula in higher education across countries; pedagogical models, corresponding practices, and international examples characterizing the implementation of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary teaching in higher education; forms of research collaboration that transcend conventional disciplinary boundaries; and major barriers obstructing the adoption and continuation of multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity across higher education institutions. (Martin Davies & Devlin, 2010)

Keywords: *Multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, higher education.*

Introduction

Global contemporary society faces a series of crises of tremendous complexity, including climate change, food security, biodiversity loss, human health pandemics, poverty, inequality, and widespread corruption (Martin Davies & Devlin, 2010). Addressing such mega-problems calls for rethinking education, research, and governance (Liu et al., 2022). In particular, higher education institutions (HEIs) are key players with respect to both education for sustainable development and fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals.

A central ambition in rethinking research-led education is to introduce multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. The overwhelming majority of educational programmes are still conducted within the boundaries of individual disciplines. Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches span a spectrum of experience under the broad cognate of cross-disciplinary education. They offer exciting opportunities not only to enrich existing programmes, but also to engender institutional transformation towards a truly integrated system.

2. Definitions and Conceptual Frameworks

Multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary approaches are often invoked as a means of responding to the complexity of societal issues and advancing science and technology (Martin Davies & Devlin, 2010). Understood in a general framework, multidisciplinary approaches are additive, interdisciplinary approaches are integrative, and transdisciplinary approaches are societal. Multidisciplinary approaches involve workers from two or more disciplines tackling a common problem yet each disciple maintaining its own identity; the collaborative work can thus be described as additive. Interdisciplinary approaches emerge when two or more disciplines integrate their knowledge to create a new hybrid discipline but not yet producing a final and sustainable societal result; the collaborative work can thus be described as integrating. Transdisciplinary approaches occur when distinct academic disciplines merge or even cease to exist, while also engaging societal actors. The goal is a productive response to societal and global issues like climate change, pandemics, poverty, and financial crises—problems of knowledge generation that fall outside the boundaries of a given institution and beyond the sphere of academia.

2.1. Multidisciplinarity

Multidisciplinary approaches aim to address issues through the perspectives and methodologies associated with multiple disciplines. Such approaches involve the coordinated use of academic knowledge from two or more disciplines while remaining discipline-specific in the exploration of the issue being addressed. The collaboration is generally organized, structured, and directed toward a common purpose, and the involvement of each discipline follows the established practices and methodologies of that discipline. Multidisciplinary work brings about additive contributions rather than integrative engagement—individual perspectives from different disciplines are assembled, but interrelationships and linkages among the components across disciplines are rarely highlighted and articulated (Martin Davies & Devlin, 2010).

2.2. Interdisciplinarity

The intellectual and affective traditions associated with higher education often presume that thinking is the exclusive prerogative of legitimately-entered subjects of knowledge—rather than a resource that curates, or elaborates, interdisciplinary subject content. Yet, these perceptions side-step the challenge of thinking itself. Thinking is both a commonality and diversity; it self-evidently retains an intrinsic unicity, yet is articulated in an indefinite plurality. Thinking is always generative—every vocabulary of thought generates not only functions, strategic intents; it also engenders its own figuration as an object of awareness—each art or discipline spins out a system of specific operation by which one thinks anything for oneself and a second-order or metadiscernment or critique of what such thinking itself becomes. Such are actual styles of thinking that then emerge to illuminate the frameworks of higher education itself. The challenge of the institutionalization of any interdisciplinary curriculum remains complex, originating from the conceptual terrain, but also from the self-

organization of faculties and institutions, from the regulation of faculties by funding paradigms, from the preconceived shapes of curricular progress, historically entrenched, and from the numerous divergences in culture, faith or ideology that attend different disciplines. These issues are arthritic at all levels of educational policymaking.

A single hypothesis is advanced. In finding, as has been shown, how to think the long-established configurations of disciplinarity themselves within higher education, and how to trace the cross-breeding of disciplines through the process whereby one discipline becomes another discipline, a basic articulation of institutional, pedagogical, epistemological and sociological perspectives becomes determinable. It remains, then, to be questioned what hereditary forms and crossbred types of discipline already occur across the contemporary panorama of higher education. From this baseline, though education arises out of disciplines, the mediations by which it proceeds—and becomes higher education—now appear workable less as principles than simply as a simple doublings at the corporeal then material, then enabling, anl by the self-calibrations of self-organization within the disciplines—how the disciplines discipline the cross-discipline they engender (Martin Davies & Devlin, 2010).

2.3. Transdisciplinarity

Transdisciplinarity is a concerted effort to address complex, real-world problems and is distinguished by the inclusion of non-academic actors (Martin Davies & Devlin, 2010). In higher education, transdisciplinarity is practised through collaborative work between academic disciplines and non-academic partners, such as government, businesses, and civil society. Resolution of complex problems requires the integration of knowledge from a variety of disciplines, and the involvement of non-academic actors brings access to different perspectives and knowledge domains. A transdisciplinary approach to research aims to produce solutions that are relevant and applicable in practice.

Transdisciplinary research fosters conditions for innovative thinking and new solutions to challenging problems, while also contributing to the societal impact mission of academic institutions. Transdisciplinarity involves research co-development with non-academic partners on complex, real-world, often urgent societal issues, and the accompanying connectedness of knowledge vectors. Examples of transdisciplinary research include science and technology studies, water governance, disaster risk reduction, and participatory approaches in the social sciences (Vitor de Souza Marins et al., 2019).

3. Rationale for Multidisciplinary and Interdisciplinary Approaches in Higher Education

High-profile attempts at addressing vexing problems facing society, such as global warming, socio-economic inequality, public health, and international security, often rely on formulated cross-disciplinary perspectives and collaborative approaches. Difficult-to-solve real-world issues frequently require a comprehensive understanding that goes beyond a single discipline. Consequently, organizations and governments seek expertise across fields of knowledge for policy formulation and the identification of effective solutions that embrace all contributing factors. From the perspective of higher education policy, cross-disciplinary curriculum development is thus also driven by the overarching goal of helping address and resolve complex, contemporary problems (Martin Davies & Devlin, 2010).

Translating an elaborate scientific or technological idea into a patent, product, or commercial application that generates widespread societal value necessitates working throughout diverse and often unconnected fields within the broader formulation of knowledge integration. Conversely, a grant proposal involving the growth of urban antagonism or a scientific crusade against teenage morbid obesity and drug dealing may lead readily to counter-proposals originating from specialized knowledge entrenched within other scholarly domains. Such knowledge integration and collaboration rely to a large degree upon tacit knowledge—which may not be easily expressed in spoken or written form nor effectively addressed in formal education systems—and upon sufficiently extensive social networks of contact and interaction. If input, analysis, or development of such collaboration is to grow from a more formal and structured basis, considerable investment in deliberately organized and managed "knowledge-integration" programs or initiatives, purely and simply, is required.

3.1. Societal and Economic Imperatives

The growing consensus that higher education systems must prepare students for complex and unpredictable contemporary changes demands urgent attention. Adaptation requires shifting educational paradigms toward a new model in which opening the curriculum to university-wide and external assets is a priority. That constitutes a radical departure. Upward pressures seeking curricula free of disciplinary boundaries are backed by emerging societal and economic imperatives. Guidelines issued by governments, national councils, and the European Union all call for such endeavors. Systems able to meet mounting demands are scarce (Martin Davies & Devlin, 2010).

3.2. Knowledge Integration and Innovation

Integration of knowledge across disciplines is perceived as vital for individual and collective improvement, be it within or outside higher education (Martin Davies & Devlin, 2010). Experience with cross-disciplinary projects demonstrates that not only is innovation a probable outcome, but also the generation of concepts for new, interdisciplinary fields of work, technology, and research is entirely feasible. Knowledge integration arises when diverse fields come together to develop hybrid themes. It involves the transfer of tacit knowledge, such as experiences, hunches, and real-world applications between disciplines or interaction between disciplines that are already loosely intertwined. Integration takes form through vital local or transnational, transversal, or functional networks that enable cross-fertilization and facilitate knowledge transfer.

3.3. Curriculum and Skill Development

The complex and multifaceted nature of contemporary global challenges demands the kind of intelligent and creative integration of knowledge that transgresses conventional disciplinary boundaries. For this reason, many higher education institutions are promoting multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and even transdisciplinary approaches to curriculum design and delivery, despite well-documented epistemological, institutional, and pedagogical barriers (Martin Davies & Devlin, 2010). Such approaches are seen as essential to providing the education that graduates increasingly need to make effective contributions in the workplace (Wragg et al., 2019). Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary curricula are designed to stimulate integrated understanding among disciplines and across fields, thereby enhancing students' capacity to structure problems, display innovative thinking, critically evaluate their own and others' ideas, collaborate with peers, communicate effectively, and participate in the synthesis of knowledge. These capabilities are in turn shaped and assessed through well-conceived learning outcomes, which help guide both instructional strategies and student efforts.

4. Historical Evolution and Policy Context

Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches have gained ground in most higher education systems over the last two decades. In common parlance, the concepts of multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity are often used interchangeably to refer to approaches that cross traditional disciplinary boundaries. Yet, broadly and in the literature, they differ categorically (Martin Davies & Devlin, 2010). Multidisciplinarity refers to the application of knowledge and methodologies from two or more disciplines to a given problem, often with the sum of the contributions being greater than its constituent parts. The multiple disciplines involved remain usually distinct from each other, and cooperative links among them typically are limited. In the context of education and training, multidisciplinarity can refer to a curriculum or a learning programme that includes the study of more than one discipline, without significant or substantial integration. It can also refer to individual learning experiences that draw on multiple disciplines responsively. Interdisciplinarity entails an additional dimension in that disciplines collaborate in an integrated manner in the pursuit of a common goal. The distinction between the two approaches holds important implications for curriculum design, pedagogy, and assessment procedures.

Many time-honoured educational approaches, such as problem-based learning, project-based learning, and inquiry-based learning, cross disciplinary boundaries, but can be delivered within a traditional multidisciplinary framework. Likewise, curricula designed solely on multidisciplinary principles can draw on long-established pedagogies, and learning experiences that draw on multiple disciplines may also be framed against more broadly recognised pedagogies. In multidisciplinary settings, it is feasible for institutions to develop integrated programmes framed on established curricula, rudimentary forms of multi- or inter-disciplinary teaching, and combinations of single- and dual-discipline degrees. The absence of significant integration and articulation from one discipline to another allows such approaches to remain academically and institutionally viable without requiring systematic shifts in organisational structure—examined in further detail in subsequent sections.

The evolution of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary activities has involved influential developments at multiple levels—international, national, regional, and local within Australia. Of particular significance are national funding initiatives aimed at building demand-side capacity to support interdisciplinary research, curriculum development, training, and collaboration. Other provinces and territories in Australia, too, outline such educational developments and priorities without significant references to multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary practices—yet historical records indicate that Australia pre-dates Canada in policy formulation in this area. Barriers to the development, promotion, and evaluation of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary activities remain entrenched in many institutions, a symptom of lack of demand, career-path connectivity, and recognition systems. A related trend has seen attention shifted to the emerging curriculum design (multi-, inter-, cross-) and associated assessment frameworks and models.

5. Pedagogical Models and Teaching–Learning Practices

A total state-based funding scheme has created substantial barriers for cross-university common-credit arrangements in Australia. This has inhibited collaboration and cross-institutional work and restricted participation in national and international cross-border, cross-entity, and cross-discipline work. At a time when efforts to increase equity and accessibility in higher education are paramount, these arrangements negatively impact expanding higher education opportunities for vertical learning and forming a more inclusive citizenry that engages in co-creation of knowledge. If students are assumed to

know or seek knowledge of where, who, and what resources are needed for a pathway of learning that leads from level A to level Z, this places the burden of responsibility on them. Recognizing that students require access to learning pathways with assistance in co-designing more flexible, adaptive, and responsive national learning systems to suit country, state, and local needs is critical. The burden of regulation should not rest entirely on the shoulders of students, as they may not discover or perceive significant gaps, or areas of interest in which they can deepen their knowledge, expertise, or experience. Higher education can therefore engage with multiple sectors and disciplines to seek a conscious analysis and modification of the current regulation framework (J. Friedow et al., 2012). Collaboration between disciplines, combined with a conscious championship of change, can lead to the systematic design, enablement, and evaluation of more inclusive practices.

The strategy seeks to alter the conversation regarding higher education debate toward pedagogy and the student experience. Progressing from what is being taught to how it is taught opens up broader and deeper discussions about a range of curriculum issues. The goal is to extend and integrate understanding of, and discussions around, learning and teaching such that examination of student experience becomes second nature. Rather than pre-fixating on whether students are progressing toward TLO, the focus moves to whether the design, arrangement, and combination of opportunities provided are generating experience toward that outcome (Vitor de Souza Marins et al., 2019). The sequence, interdependence, accumulation, spacing, and integration of experience across and through subjective and authentic journeys becomes the charged focus of more open and collaborative conversations.

5.1. Collaborative Campus Structures

Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary higher education curricula thrive where cooperative institutional environments facilitate fluid engagement across diverse stakeholders. Collaborative structures providing physical venues and organizational support for cross-campus teamwork foster productive engagement among faculty, students, and external communities from the outset of multi- or inter-disciplinary educational initiatives. Several distinctive collaborative campus models embody such principles.

Centers and institutes dedicated to specific themes, challenges, or problems extend institutional missions while catalyzing, facilitating, and supporting cross-disciplinary work and education across the full spectrum of knowledge domains. Campuswide virtual teams, composed of representatives from academic and non-academic employee groups, as well as external partners, enable structured dialogue about institutional policy development, program initiation, and curricular offering, helping to articulate shared institutional priorities and aspirations. However, such collaborative activities seldom lead to effective multi- or inter-disciplinary educational outcomes, unless existing arrangements can be modified to create a positive, non-programmatic atmosphere conducive to exploration and experimentation. The collegiate model of governance and curriculum, viewed as far more complex than any existing alternative, creates distinct challenges in instilling the depth, breadth, and room for initiative necessary to successfully anchor grass-roots multi- or inter-disciplinary efforts. (Mae Abdallah, 2011)

5.2. Curricular Design and Assessment Strategies

Many higher-learning institutions offer multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary programs, certificates, and courses, yet assessment practices commonly adhere to methods established for single disciplines (Martin Davies & Devlin, 2010).

Assessment in a multidisciplinary context evaluates the extent to which students draw upon multiple disciplines (Frost, 2018). Interdisciplinary learning, by contrast, requires the integration of disciplines to construct new perspectives, emphasizing synthesis and evaluation as well as knowledge acquisition (Thomas et al., 2005). Within an interdisciplinary framework, desirable attributes and appropriate activities must be identified, and assessment should span various levels of integration from simple combination to reciprocal relationship.

Taking stock of student learning and considering the necessity to demonstrate achievement of institutional learning outcomes facilitate the process of articulating desired learning outcomes. Accepting the premise that undergraduates cannot be expected to attain advanced interdisciplinary learning, yet seeking to cultivate integrative thinking, the goal designated by one institution for an interdisciplinary core is therefore the explicit development of interdisciplinary thinking. Satisfactory evidence—collected longitudinally from multiple assessment methods and sources—of accomplishment of these learning goals is required to comply with accreditation mandates.

5.3. Tools and Technologies for Cross-Disciplinary Work

Communication technology provides tools to enhance students' capacity to work collaboratively across disciplines and provide sustaining channels for dialogue among those who inhabit different fields and cultural practices. The rapid growth of highly developed audio and video conferencing tools enables faculty and students in disparate locations to collaborate in real time, develop mutually intelligible vocabularies, and create projects that synthesize ideas and methods from different disciplines.

Web tools facilitate a range of pedagogical approaches that address the tensions inherent in multiparty collaboration by enabling academic conversations framed within broader cultural issues. Specific activities, such as posting critical commentary on colleagues' multimedia presentations via a sound-recording application, foster discussion that can yield more productive interaction in subsequent meetings and help identify common cross-domain concerns (Martin Davies & Devlin, 2010). Online platforms allow students to comment asynchronously, thus enriching and extending the conversation and supporting cross-disciplinary group processes. Such documentation of dialogue that takes place outside formal sessions serves as a useful pedagogical tool and instructional resource, while also enhancing student ownership of the collaboration.

6. Research Cultures, Collaboration, and Evaluation

Research cultures, collaboration practices, publication norms, and evaluation frameworks influence the recognition of cross-disciplinary outputs. Research activities tend to be discipline-bound and follow different cultures. Factors promoting collaboration across disciplines include a collaborative campus environment and the establishment of several multimodal collaborative structures such as centers, institutes, and virtual communities. Research collaboration becomes difficult between disciplines with very different methodologies or ways of reasoning. Furthermore, disciplines still emphasize the importance of rigorous training in their own fields, which also hinders formal collaboration across disciplines (Rons, 2013). To overcome these challenges, a negotiation space where participants can articulate, compare, and harmonize their different needs and worries is essential, and the articulation of a shared epistemology across known disciplines helps participants understand others' disciplinary cultures and habits (Reckinger & Wille, 2018).

7. Challenges, Barriers, and Mitigation Strategies

Despite the growing recognition of the value of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches in higher education, common challenges impede their implementation (Lenhart & Bouwma-Gearhart, 2022). Higher education institutions are often structured along traditional disciplinary lines, which creates structural, epistemological, and social barriers to cross-disciplinary work. Institutional resistance, resource limitations, epistemological tensions, and diverse equity, inclusion, and access factors can hinder the establishment of effective multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary curricula.

An institution's resistance to cross-disciplinary collaboration is frequently coupled with limited resources to support its implementation. Permanent administrative structures, funding models, and accreditation guidelines continue to preserve traditional disciplinary organizing frames, which often limits the adoption of cross-disciplinary approaches. The existing substantial investments in specialized disciplines and the associated entrenched systems of rewards further contribute to institutional inertia and resource constraints.

Epistemological tensions continue to exist between traditional disciplines, which can complicate the provision of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary curricula. Concern about potential loss of disciplinary identity and autonomy below institutional and departmental levels can impede cross-disciplinary collaboration. All disciplines, fields, and curriculum types remain compatible with cross-disciplinary approaches; developing frameworks to articulate the commonalities across them and fostering robust dialogues around the associated epistemological changes will help to mitigate these tensions.

7.1. Institutional Resistance and Resource Constraints

Traditional structures and practices rooted in disciplinary divisions constitute major obstacles to multidisciplinary endeavors at higher-education institutions. Administrative incentives and rewards often support societal practices that run counter to a principal goal of multidisciplinarity, namely coalescing academic practice around the integrated solution of emergent problems (K Gardner, 2013). The dominant paradigms and associated institutional structures that channel attention and configure education play a vital role in constituting and sustaining disciplines as the basic currency of scholarly practice. Continued attention to regional and international accreditation schemes, to institutional branding and reputation, to funding opportunities at the institutional and faculty level, to faculty-staff hiring practices, and to the criteria for the promotion of faculty all indicates the persistent primacy attached to the disciplinary anachronism, notwithstanding substantial shifts in applicable content. Moreover, larger lines of mobilization and defence remain deeply entrenched at the intra- and extra-institutional levels (Palmer & Carter, 2014).

7.2. Epistemological Tensions and disciplinary Autonomy

One of the key obstacles influencing the development and implementation of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches pertains to epistemological tensions and concerns about disciplinary autonomy. Significant variations exist across disciplines in terms of epistemic frameworks, knowledge construction methods, and standards for validating knowledge claims. These differences can give rise to tensions when scholars and students from diverse disciplines seek to collaborate on common problems. The resolved practical tension between the benefits of cross-disciplinary collaboration and discipline-specific pedagogical commitments is further complicated by concerns about disciplinary colonization, exploitation, or degradation in the educational context (Martin Davies & Devlin, 2010).

Disciplinary distinctions provide a basis for organizing the academic and professional world. They create a structuring architecture that sorts knowledge and knowledge producers into identifiable locations within systems of meaning. Such distinctions are reiterated through scholarly associations, funding agencies, and specialized journals. Furthermore, curriculums, governance structures, job appointment standards, and the tenure process typically align with these academic arrangements. Differences in knowledge and pedagogy remain significant across disciplines, affecting the viability and character of collaborative scholarship, teaching, learning, and cross-disciplinary approaches.

7.3. Equity, Inclusion, and Access

Cross-disciplinary educational frameworks can either amplify or attenuate inequities in individuals' access to post-secondary curricula, participation in enquiry, and benefits derived from these experiences. When the design and implementation of such frameworks eschew principles of equitable, inclusive, and universally accessible (EU) education, substantial impediments to participation and a concomitant attenuation of material benefits can result (Byrd, 2019). Attention to these principles in the design of cross-disciplinary educational opportunities and the associated curricular support provided to learners can amplify participation and better assure equitable benefits either across or from different disciplines. Where curricular complexity increases as a result of participation in cross-disciplinary opportunities, EU principles become imperative to facilitate access and participation. Since EU principles are now widely acknowledged as compatible with disciplinary rigor, attention to these principles opens possibilities for novel cross-disciplinary enquiry that can further align learning activities with participation imperatives.

8. Future Trajectories and Strategic Recommendations

Several challenges impede the sustainability of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches in higher education institutions, thereby limiting their full adoption in teaching and research. Strategic investments in governance, policy alignment, pedagogical models, and institutional cultures may mitigate these impediments and support the continued evolution of cross-disciplinary practices—a symbiosis favoured by their intrinsic adaptability, especially to new requirements posed by society, the economy, and the higher education sector itself; a condition recognised as a necessary condition for accelerating the transposition of policies into practices and technologies (Havas, 2008). Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches must be outside the core of most institutions for some time yet, thus preserving the flexibility to rapidly adapt to new opportunities and challenges that may arise in the future.

9. Conclusion

Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives have become increasingly important in higher education. Their adoption can help institutions address societal and economic challenges and better align learning and research with overall missions and institutional needs. Multi- and interdisciplinary approaches are also essential for knowledge integration and are explicit learning goals in their own right. Furthermore, collective responses to the complex challenges society faces today, including climate change, poverty and inequality, and technological advances, require the combined insights and efforts of multiple disciplines (Martin Davies & Devlin, 2010). Education systems cannot keep pace with the transformation of knowledge and information. Therefore, institutions are coming up with diverse curriculum designs to cross different

disciplines not only in higher education education but also in pre-university education. Equipping students with cross-disciplinary capabilities will perhaps have a more profound impact than acquiring knowledge because knowledge will become the internet commodity. As a higher education curriculum reform trend, students should have access from the early stage, M-PIE (Model, Pattern, Information, and Emotion) and their importance will be widely appreciated as collaboration becomes more frequent among disciplines.

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