

## British Academy Call for Evidence on Interdisciplinarity

### University of Sussex

June 2015

This response is made on behalf of the University of Sussex.

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We would be happy to attend a relevant evidence session.

### Questions for University Management

#### **1. To what extent do you seek to promote interdisciplinary research and why? How do you support interdisciplinary research at your organisation?**

Interdisciplinarity has been at the core of the University of Sussex since its foundation, in terms of both its teaching and its research. The University seeks to encourage and support interdisciplinarity through its culture as well as through specific mechanisms. Our current University Strategy, published in 2013, has interdisciplinarity embedded and threaded throughout.

In terms of specific mechanisms, we operate Sussex Research as a set of schemes through which research is supported and promoted. These offer financial support to develop networks, both internal and external (UK and internationally), pump-priming for new investigations, and larger investment for strategic programmes. Whilst some of these are open to monodisciplinary topics, we particularly encourage cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional collaboration, in order to develop interesting and competitive ideas. Whilst we strongly support core disciplinary knowledge, we also seek to enable the combinations of that underpinning knowledge in multi-, trans- and inter-disciplinary activities to enable exploration of complex topics.

The interactions around interdisciplinary research include spanning the boundaries between academic and non-academic experts and practitioners, to enhance the quality of the research and to assist its wider use.

As well as institutionally-operated schemes, each of the Schools (most of which are multi-departmental) supports interdisciplinarity, in ways that are appropriate to their subject areas. They typically operate in a cross-disciplinary manner in mechanisms such as mentoring of Early Career Researchers, internal project review, models for amplifying and capturing research impact, and strategic planning.

#### **2. How do the departmental structures in your university support (or potentially hinder) the development of interdisciplinary research? How is interdisciplinary research best situated within departments, institutes or centres?**

The University's structure of academic schools and departments provides a necessary administrative framework, and is also important in the context of the delivery of teaching. The University supports the creation and operation of research centres, groups and networks, of

varying sizes, many of which are interdisciplinary in nature. These currently number 95 in total, roughly half of which are recognised as smaller school-contained groupings and the other half as university research centres. We have an active engagement between the directors of these research centres and groups, overseen by a Director of Interdisciplinary Research, who also manages Sussex Research.

Under the auspices of Sussex Research, we are in the process of investing £3 million into each of two new interdisciplinary programmes, around digital humanities and sustainability. Both of these have involvement from across the University, engaging sciences, social sciences and humanities. An open competition was held and these initiatives were assembled in a bottom-up approach. We feel that major investments in interdisciplinarity are more likely to bear fruit if they are planned in this organic way rather than superimposed on existing research capacity from the top down. This follows similar investment in a programme of neuroscience, which was a pilot for the Sussex Research scheme. The University's Strategic Plan allows for a further such investment within the current planning period.

The structural constraints on interdisciplinary research tend to revolve around the ability for researchers to meet serendipitously, and for other programmed tasks and responsibilities to make attendance at events or involvement in activities problematic. Whilst the University has some social spaces, the architecture does not support interactions. The newer and planned buildings take this into account, and provide for better opportunities for chance encounters and ad hoc exchanges. We are conscious of the need to enhance this wherever possible.

### **3. What are the advantages of organising university departments or research centres along interdisciplinary lines? What are the disadvantages of doing so?**

There is a tension in determining appropriate structures between those that underpin research and those that underpin teaching. As noted above, we recognise and support both monodisciplinary and interdisciplinary research. Our departments, like many other institutions, are generally structured around disciplines, in support of degree programmes. In a number of fields, the external professional body accreditation and the constitution of disciplinary REF Units of Assessment influences the maintenance of these structures.

Disciplinary-based organisational structures can inhibit interdisciplinary activities, although the constraints can arise as much through the resource planning and management processes as through the physical and organisational structures themselves. Budgetary systems tend to militate against initiatives where they cross organisational structure boundaries, as each unit is usually keen to maximise its own return, which can make it harder to negotiate leadership and split of responsibilities and resource (the same may apply between institutions). When the collaborating units are in very different financial circumstances, these difficulties can be exacerbated, to the detriment of the research.

Conversely, interdisciplinary-based centres or institutes might provide a focus for certain types of research, but can also raise issues of their status as budgetary units and their relationship to disciplinary-based departments, if the two sit alongside each other. The locus of an individual's 'home' is important, and their balance of contribution between teaching and research is likely to vary through their career, hence their 'home' might be perceived to shift between an institute and a department, which could be destabilising. Matrix structures (i.e. across research and teaching, and possibly other foci) can be used, but their success depends on the individuals and the flexibility and adaptability of the structures.

### **4. At what point does an area of research necessitate the development of new departments, institutes or centres?**

There can be a drive to create a new centre or institute in response to an external driver, such as a call for proposals, in which the funder is expecting such a development, in order to show commitment from the institution and the substance of the investment. This may be an appropriate response, providing a focus and a brand for the area of funded activity. Centres can usually be accommodated within established structures. However, it may lead to an excessive number of centres, after the life of the funding, or to entities that are striving to be the equivalent of departments.

The academic and economic viability of departments (or equivalent) typically depends on having a mixed portfolio of research and teaching activities. Units that are wholly research-based can struggle to exist once their core research funding is reduced. The major programmes funded under Sussex Research are embedded within the participating schools, and are intended to generate additional (and competitive) academic capacity, rather than to fund individual research projects.

The evolution of topics into new disciplines happens over a longer timescale, and involves more than one institution to make a decision to create a relevant structural unit. It is also likely to be accompanied by educational developments, so that the mixed portfolio can be delivered. The latter may first occur at postgraduate levels.

**5. To what extent, and how, do you promote interdisciplinary teaching and training at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels?**

Interdisciplinary teaching is facilitated by a degree structure combining core, optional and elective modules, with electives chosen from a range of disciplines beyond the student's core subject. There are also certain programme pathways that are inherently interdisciplinary such as those in Gender Studies, American Studies, Cultural Studies and International Development. These tend to be aligned with our research centres. We are introducing further, regionally-based, interdisciplinary pathways in African, Middle Eastern and Asian studies to embed recently-created research centres into the undergraduate curriculum, too.

At postgraduate level, there are many interdisciplinary programmes such as Masters in Climate Change and Development, Climate Change and Policy, and Gender and Development. These reflect the interdisciplinary research conducted by teaching faculty, either within or across research groups and centres. Sussex was originally constituted by interdisciplinary schools and the spirit of some of these lives on in programmes formerly attached, for instance, to COGS (Cognitive science) and AFRAS (African and Asian Studies).

Supervision of postgraduate research students is typically on a multidisciplinary basis, to broaden the range of advice. The presence of an ESRC Doctoral Training Centre and an AHRC Doctoral Training Partnership enable us to maximise interdisciplinary research training for our students in those areas, and also brings faculty together, generating research synergies and alliances that would otherwise be less likely to happen.

**6. What, if any, specific career development support do you have in place for academics pursuing interdisciplinary research?**

As noted above, the mechanisms provided by Sussex Research support interdisciplinary research proposals, and we seek to encourage a cross-campus interdisciplinary ethos. The academic development, appraisal, reward and promotion processes seek to take account of the quality of the individual's research, regardless of its type or form. The University was the first UK university signatory (and is still one of only a small number) of the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment. This illustrates our belief in assessing the individual output, not on using the output's location or aggregated data as proxies.

Our major new investments in digital humanities and sustainability will bring to Sussex a cohort of early career as well as more established researchers, appointed specifically to work across disciplinary boundaries in these areas. Further such investments are planned.

## **7. Other comments**

The Working Group may wish to make reference to the 1997 report 'Interdisciplinary Research: Process, Structures and Evaluation' written for the then Scottish Higher Education Funding Council by the Scottish Universities Research Policy Consortium (ISBN 0952986213). The Consortium was chaired by Professor John Laver, a Fellow and former Vice-President of the Academy.