

NOTES FROM PLENARY SESSION 3

Thursday 20 January 2005
Maggie Gill

The aim of this session was to hear the experiences of two scientists who had worked in inter-disciplinary research for many years.

Professor Joyce Tait drew both on her own experiences and analysis of EC and ESRC inter-disciplinary projects. She outlined two types of interdisciplinary research, Mode 1 which led to the establishment of new disciplines and Mode 2, where teams came together to address real problems. She presented a diagram of factors which were deemed to encourage interdisciplinarity vs factors deemed to discourage interdisciplinarity: some factors such as funding, appeared on both sides of the equation. She talked about the challenges for both individual researchers trying to develop careers in inter-disciplinary research, including the perceived negative impact of the RAE, and for managers wishing to facilitate inter-disciplinary research. She drew attention to the importance of institutional structures and long-term funding as important features of a supportive environment for inter-disciplinary research.

Anna Jöborn drew on her experience of both successful and unsuccessful inter-disciplinary projects in Sweden and stressed the importance of analyzing and publishing the failures, to enable others to learn from them. She talked of the initial difficulties of bringing different disciplines together, through different languages, different procedures and different world views. She emphasized the importance of developing a team philosophy and the potential contribution of common Case Studies, or the goal of writing a book together in achieving success. She emphasized the importance of diplomatic leadership and of getting written agreement (e.g. on IP) early on and she drew attention to the need to allow more time before assessing inter-disciplinary projects. Team members who were interested in inter-disciplinarity often tended to be creative, curious, flexible and good communicators, although teams needed a variety of skills and approaches. She commented that researchers should be involved for at least 30% of their time and should aim to have fun! She ended with a wish list for fostering more inter-disciplinary research, which included new management structures and promotion policies to facilitate career progression, more scientific journals with an inter-disciplinary agenda and the possibility for researchers to move freely between academia and the real world.

Questions touched on the international dimension and whether other regions such as Australasia were further ahead with having a facilitating environment in place to foster inter-disciplinarity. It was felt that this might be the case for rural/land research, due to its significance to the Australian economy. There was some discussion on the type of publications and the balance between research

excellence and knowledge transfer – messages don't get passed to the stakeholder community through academic journals.