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Calming Troubled Waters: Making Interdisciplinarity Work

The aim of this study was to investigate several important themes relating to interdisciplinary collaboration, including: the processes involved in undertaking interdisciplinary research; an exploration of research outcomes and formats which best address stakeholders' requirements; and investigating issues surrounding the refereeing and publication of interdisciplinary research findings. This project was based on lessons learned from two EU funded projects and interviews with project participants. In addition, the research team synthesised material derived from three workshops on the theme '*Exploring Routes to Interdisciplinarity*' that they organised at the first RELU conference (Rural Economy and Land Use: the challenge for research) held in Birmingham, 19-21 January 2005.

Findings suggest that researchers do face difficulties in understanding what others do and that involving a range of disciplines in a project does not necessarily produce interdisciplinary research or successful communication. In some cases, interdisciplinarity is not needed. However, where interdisciplinarity is deemed important, it is essential that efforts are made to build and develop effective communication channels.

One building block towards better communication is to ensure that project participants have a clearer understanding of disciplinary frameworks and that disciplinary contributions are mutually intelligible. Working towards interdisciplinarity will take time and require resources. Several suggestions were put forward including meetings and/or workshops where researchers spend time learning about, and teaching, different methodological approaches in order to enhance understanding and engender trust and respect. Projects will also need to reflect on the processes involved in building and maintaining interdisciplinary integration throughout the lifetime of the project and, potentially, beyond. Discussions with RELU researchers highlighted the need for an open dialogue on needs (e.g. trust, respect, incentives) and concerns (e.g. bad for your career) surrounding collaboration.

Publication and dissemination of outputs was an issue consistently raised during this project and we were concerned with two aspects of the dissemination process. Firstly how to meet the needs of stakeholders with different information requirements and, secondly, how researchers and Journal Editors deal with the challenges of publishing interdisciplinary academic papers. Key issues appeared to be the influence of the RAE, the availability of appropriate (top-ranking) journals, and difficulties in evaluating and refereeing interdisciplinary research.

The research team found that interdisciplinarity is dynamic, being the integration of 'ways of thinking' as part of the development of a 'way of working' and thus it cannot be produced by following a predetermined recipe. By concentrating on presenting people's experiences, perceptions, ideas and concerns rather than providing 'recommendations' for interdisciplinarity, it has become clear that there is a level of agreement between the people interviewed and the literature read. Taking a route to interdisciplinarity is not easy but with the right incentives (e.g. greater understanding of the research problem), it is ultimately more rewarding. Nevertheless, the direct

responsibility for ensuring successful collaboration (however that is defined) must lie collectively with the researchers, project manager and the funding agencies. Indirectly, the institutions that reproduce the current 'mono-disciplinary' environment in which many interdisciplinary researchers are trying to work, must also move towards breaking the weight of old disciplinary conventions which conspire to inhibit the growth and success of interdisciplinarity and interdisciplinary researchers. There is however a keen willingness amongst researchers to undertake more interdisciplinary work despite their broader concerns over currently wider institutional support.