

SUMMARY

What is interdisciplinary research? That is the question that lies at the heart of this publication by The Young Academy. The question was inspired by a Socratic dialogue among Young Academy members concerning the definition of the term ‘interdisciplinarity’. It became clear to us that what is referred to as ‘interdisciplinary’ is often nothing more than a ‘multidisciplinary’ combination of disciplinary perspectives. True interdisciplinarity goes a step beyond this – a crucial step. Interdisciplinary research characteristically involves a change in scholarly identity. Scholarly identity can be defined as the interplay between the questions that researchers pose, the methods that they use, and the outcome measures that they employ. Using specific examples, we show that a change in scholarly identity can have both beneficial and adverse effects.

Based on our survey and a series of interviews, we have analysed the obstacles to interdisciplinary research noted by Young Academy members. The interviews, which include personal accounts of interdisciplinary projects, can be found throughout the publication.

Members have identified a number of major problems: the disciplinary focus of most funding bodies; the enormous time investment required to familiarise themselves with insights from outside their own discipline; cultural differences between disciplines; and friction with an academic infrastructure that is organised largely into disciplines, especially with regard to educational matters. There are good reasons to remove or at least minimise these obstacles, however. Interdisciplinary research makes a major contribution to scientific innovation, leads to greater breadth and depth in individual disciplines, generates cross-disciplinary knowledge, and often plays a vital role in analysing the major challenges facing society.

Given all these benefits, we make a series of specific recommendations for facilitating and stimulating interdisciplinary research at all levels. At the micro level, we encourage individual researchers to free up time to acquaint themselves with other research traditions. At the intermediate level, we call on university administrators to reward interdisciplinary research and to create facilities for it, ranging from well-equipped laboratories to visiting professorships for researchers who wish to explore areas outside their own discipline. Finally, at macro level, we call on policymakers to increase funding opportunities for interdisciplinary research and on scholarly journals to consider how best to combine an interdisciplinary focus with sound peer review procedures.