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Interdisciplinary research 'neglected'

By Jennifer Bennett | 10th April, 2012

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Despite having been around since the 1970s, interdisciplinary research in Australia is still a relatively neglected field, but one that could achieve much more, a new report has found.

The Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) has just released *Strengthening Interdisciplinary Research*, outlining the problems facing work in the area. Report author Professor Gabriele Bammer, director of the ANU National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, told *Campus Review* that there were no easy answers to the complex problems facing interdisciplinary research, but that it could not be treated in the same way as single-discipline research.

"In normal [academic] disciplines, there is a standard way of proceeding, but we don't have any comparable agreement for any kind of interdisciplinary research," she said. "We need a standard protocol for writing up the different kinds of interdisciplinary research because until we do that we can't look at a range of studies and look at what worked and what didn't." These problems have been neglected for a long time because, Bammer says, "methodology is not sexy". "You get many more rewards by doing an interdisciplinary study of something than by examining that process, and there's usually not enough money in the grant to reflect on the process anyway" she said.

But actually approaching the methodology of interdisciplinary research would end up saving time and money in the future. "It means that we don't have to keep reinventing the wheel – the problem is if you get new people there's nothing much available to guide them," she said. "They might know somebody who's done something interdisciplinary before, but there's no body of knowledge, it's very different if you're working in a discipline."



The Human Genome Project, in which scientists around the world worked to map the 25,000 genes that make up the human genome, was an excellent example of researchers working to develop a methodology, said Bammer. “They sorted out the method of sequencing, which was not seen to be very exciting and [people thought] there wasn’t any interesting science, but it turned out they were wrong. Putting that massive effort into sorting out methodology has really brought the monetary cost down for gene sequencing and also the efficiency cost, and it’s opened up this huge vista of studies people can do. We need to think about a human genome-like effort to unpack the methodology of interdisciplinary research.”

The proposals made by Bammer in the report include the establishment of classification for the major kinds of interdisciplinary research, as well as standardised reporting systems; compilation of useful strategies into toolkits “providing a range of options for conducting different aspects of interdisciplinary research”; the development of a data collection system about the different kinds of research currently being undertaken, and their quality, as well as the best way of teaching skills in interdisciplinary research; and the convening of a workshop involving representatives from the government, industry, donors and research organisations.

ACOLA general manager Dr Jacques de Vos Malan said that the next phase of the project would be to survey the interdisciplinary research landscape and conduct case studies across Australia and in different research environments, including universities and private organisations.

“We’re basically looking for the best and the worst,” he said. “For example, where the multidisciplinary research approach has worked particularly well – and then examples where the going has been a lot more difficult. What we’ll be asking is, what can we learn? What are the generic lessons? Is there a degree of commonality amongst the success stories?” He said that he expected the majority of the work to be done by the end of this year, with Professor Michael Webber of the University of Melbourne already on the road conducting interviews.

For the full ACOLA report, please visit:

http://www.acola.org.au/ACOLA/Interdisciplinary_Research_Report.html