

# The Role of Interdisciplinarity in Advancing Research Excellence and Careers – the Case of IASs in Finland

Mira Kalalahti, Associate professor (guidance), University of Jyväskylä & Reetta Muhonen, Collegium Researcher, University of Turku/ Senior Research Fellow in Tampere University

Beyond Advanced Studies III: Interdisciplinary practice:  
Towards a Nordic Approach, May 5, 2022



**UNIVERSITY  
OF TURKU**

# Starting points

Focus on the role of interdisciplinarity in the context of IASs

The wider context of the talk:

Project on the role of science policy ideals in striving for research excellence

IASs as treasure chests of research; places to encourage research excellence/good research and places to reserve some quality time for research

# Research interest

How the ideal of interdisciplinary research is interpreted and implemented in the level of IASs' practices and research careers.

Discourse on the level of strategies vs. practical level

We are not that much interested **in strategy level or how respondents define interdisciplinarity**, but the role of interdisciplinarity in the level of organising activities

- Directors of IASs need to think how to implement the ideals of science policy into activities.
- Researchers working in the institutes need to live with the ideal of interdisciplinarity; conduct research, compete on funding and think about their career development.

# Data and research questions

- In the Nordic contexts IASs have profound differences in their rationalities and function (for instance, how to position the IAS in the science policy and HE fields, how to position towards interdisciplinarity and research excellence, how to organise the research community)
- Our aim is to recognize the 'rationalities' of the Finnish IAS with a special focus on interdisciplinary
- View to the topic: perceptions of the directors and IAS fellows
- We ask:
  - What kind of role interdisciplinarity has in striving for research excellence?
  - How interdisciplinarity challenges and supports research careers?

## Data:

Interviews: directors of the Finnish IASs (n=3)

Survey: Fellows (n=30) of one Finnish IAS

- First findings from the data, data driven analysis

# Positioning – interdisciplinarity & IASs

Research as  
a starting  
point

Researchers  
as a starting  
point



No straight effects on activities

Interdisciplinarity as a value  
itself



Guideline in organising  
activities

# Research as a starting point – bottom up -approach

- *For me it seems that it would be wrong to say that we should somehow collectively decide on the mission. That would be against the idea of how science makes progress; how it is based on the bottom up - approach.*

# Researchers as a starting point – IAS as a safe haven

*(- -) Neither interdisciplinarity nor impact are the starting points here, but we set researchers as a starting point. (- -) From a researcher side, you could describe this as a kind of **safe haven** in the world full of pressures.*

*It is typical for our time that focus is on strategical aims (- -) Starting from researchers and their needs, that kind of thinking has decreased, and there is less room for research interests themselves.*

# Interdisciplinarity as a value itself

*[Talks about the recruitment criteria] (- -) we ask people to address the issue of interdisciplinarity, we don't grade that (- -) I have suggested to the board, that if we really want to take interdisciplinarity seriously, we should include that in the criteria and grade it, give it a marking like we do with the methods and outputs and so on.*



# Manifestations of interdisciplinarity – case of IASs

Research  
as a starting point



Integration on the level  
of theories and  
methodologies to strive  
for research excellence

joint research seminars,  
offering time for research

Researchers as a  
starting point



”Bildung”: bringing  
researchers together to  
understand different  
disciplinary cultures, career  
capital

joint research seminars  
and facilities

Interdisciplinarity as a  
value itself



Instrumental capital to  
”play a game”

Thematical calls,  
collaboration with external  
stakeholders, joint  
research seminars and  
facilities

T  
O  
O  
L  
S

# Manifestations of interdisciplinarity: Integration on the level of theories and methodologies to strive for research excellence

*(- -) above all, we strive for interdisciplinarity in theoretical integration, instead of phenomenon-based interdisciplinarity (- -). There are quite many joint theorists and approaches, but it is not clear that we would be familiar with the discussions from other fields, which might turn out to be very similar to ours. So there is an option, that **we could learn from each other rather on the level of theories** than based on some specific theme (- -)*

Manifestations of interdisciplinarity -

Bildung: bringing researchers together to understand different disciplinary cultures and to acquire career capital

*I think that as a researcher **you need to cultivate yourself**. And yes, I admit that we have examples on people who have succeeded with the very narrow scope of research and blaa blaa blaa, but in average , it is not many people who will succeed with that kind of tactics that you don't cultivate yourself and you are able to discuss only with that one person from California who is studying the same topic with you.*

*If we think about IASs as places for academic development, it is very important that you understand your colleagues work at some level, even if you dont have any joint interests and they come from disciplines like linguistics or archeology, you still need to understand their ways of conducting research. If you end up to the position in administration or to some leadership position, you will appreciate the time you shared with your colleagues from different disciplinary backgrounds and the fact that you learned a bit about their ways of doing research.*

# Manifestations of interdisciplinarity - Instrumental capital to "play a game"

*I mean the whole excellence thing is another tricky agenda of course, because we're always looking for different ways to show excellence and become even more excellent than we were before (- -) 2022 has to be a more excellent year than 2021. And you kind of play those games, but the motto I came up with for [name of the IAS] was interdisciplinary research excellence, but I know I'm kind of playing a game there. I'm partly playing that game because I want [name of the IAS] to continue.*

# Positions and manifestations towards (interdisciplinary) research excellence – fellows perspective



UNIVERSITY  
OF TURKU

# Research as a starting point

- Reaching over disciplines and answering multi-dimensional research questions; trialling interdisciplinary research approaches ('wicked problems')
- IAS as a community which enables researchers to see their own research through other fields and their methodologies (freedom, resources, possibilities, and inspiration)
- Interdisciplinary research means ongoing adjustment, seeking research focus and open-end outcomes
- The solutions are always platforms for new problematizations.

- Interdisciplinarity in research allows to explore questions which span over multiple disciplines and therefore it enables multi-levelled knowledge formation, novel perspectives and data based analysis on phenomena –
  - it takes time and may cause insecurity about one's expertise –
    - understanding the complexity of many issues is somewhat demoralizing and does not always create hopefulness in the possibilities of solving many pressing problems. A disciplinary black-and-white worldview might help keep things simpler and more manageable ---
  - the interdisciplinary applications [...] tend to get more criticism for lacking focus compared to hyper-focus, single-discipline application --

# Interdisciplinary as a starting point

- Seeing beyond one discipline gives communicative, methodological, theoretical, and co-operative skills.
- ‘Risky adventure’ for the most competitive positions and funding instruments. Risk for losing the ‘traditional’ career.
- Interdisciplinary networks are flexible and adjustable for multiple infrastructures, but researchers might confront ‘othering’ and detachment from the networks and career continuities in the academia.
- Lack of permanent positions and exclusion for the disciplinary expertise



-- [IAS] has made me think more about the general importance of boundary work, not as an exclusion mechanism, but also as a mirror by questioning, probing and crossing boundaries. –

-- interdisciplinary research often belongs to 'nowhere' in terms of funding, panels and publications, which may make achievements more difficult –

# Interdisciplinary as value in itself

- Pros and cons of following the science policy ideal
- An instrument for highly valued positions and funding (a way to stand out)
- A way to compete in the academia; appealing for multiple employees and institutional settings.
- Expected in applications but unrecognized in the evaluation practices

- It is encouraged in grant applications, although the applications then go to single-discipline reviewers --
- In most universities, it is still much talk and less action. Starting from the students, these institutions are still very much silos, and value 'stocking to your own area' --

# Discussion

Research as  
a starting  
point

Researchers  
as a starting  
point



Safer side? Risky adventure?

Interdisciplinarity as a value  
itself



Safer side? "Risky adventure"?



**UNIVERSITY  
OF TURKU**

**Thank you!**