

## INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH – PERSPECTIVE OF A UK RESEARCH FUNDER

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## UK Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC - Background

- 250 m. euro annual budget
- One of 7 UK Research Councils (RCUK) with comprehensive coverage
- Values: Quality, Impact and Independence
- Responsive, strategic and capacity building investments

## UK Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC – Disciplinary structure

## Why ESRC has no disciplinary structure!

- Disciplines are social constructs
- Excellence with impact, impact more likely from Mode 2 research
- Ease of contribution to societal challenges
- BUT – challenges of a world where for others disciplines are powerful forces

## Disciplines are social constructs (1)

### Economics

- Adam Smith - Philosopher and Economist  
(Theory of Moral Sentiments)
- John Nash - Mathematician and Economist  
(Real Algebraic Manifolds)
- Amartya Sen - Philosopher and Economist  
(The Idea of Justice)
- Daniel Kahneman - Psychologist and Economist  
(Thinking Fast and Slow)

## Disciplines are social constructs (2)

- In the US, psychologists are typically found in medical schools
- In the UK, sociologists are increasingly found in social policy departments
- In India, management and business studies is not in the remit of Indian Council of Social Science Research
- In China, human geography is funded by the Chinese Academy of Science.

## Disciplines are social constructs with fluid boundaries. Add in Mode 2 perspective

1994 The New Production of Knowledge – the dynamics of science and research in contemporary societies

Helga Nowotny et al

Mode 1 : academic monopoly of knowledge production, discipline based

Mode 2 : co-production of knowledge, problem orientated and trans-disciplinary

## ESRC and Mode 2

Excellence with impact:

Impact: positive societal and/or economic difference

Impact more likely if research co-produced, problem orientated and trans-disciplinary

## ESRC and Mode 2

- Problem orientated, within and beyond social science
- Within (mostly!) social science:
  - \* Global poverty alleviation – with UK Department for International Development
  - \* Dementia – with Department of Health
  - \* Enterprise with British Bankers Association and Industry Department (also a good way to lever in money to social science research!)

N.B. All such partnerships: must be wholly in line with values of quality, impact and independence

## Problem orientated, beyond social science, ESRC and Cross-Council Programmes



## Horizon 2020 - Societal Challenges

- Health, demographic change and well-being;
- European Bioeconomy Challenges: Food security, sustainable agriculture and forestry, marine and maritime and inland water research;
- Secure, clean and efficient energy;
- Smart, green and integrated transport;
- Climate action, resource efficiency and raw materials;
- Europe in a changing world – inclusive, innovative and reflective societies;
- Secure societies, Protecting freedom and security of Europe and its citizens.

## Interdisciplinarity and social science contributions: skills approach

To conduct interdisciplinary research effectively, researchers were thought to need:

- good interpersonal skills
  - good communication skills
  - openness to others' methods and terminology
  - a willingness to work towards developing a common language
- STREP – “Changing Knowledge and Disciplinary Boundaries” FP6  
Priority 7

Researchers from Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Spain, Sweden and UK

## BUT – challenges of a world where for others disciplines are powerful forces

- New researchers seek tenure/promotion
  - Tenure/promotion needs publications in “top” journals
  - “Top” journals are controlled by disciplines e.g. American Economic Review by American Economic Association
  - Therefore, disciplinary publication incentives tension with Mode 2 contemporary knowledge production
- ? Will open access (RCUK from April 2013!) affect this with radical new publication patterns

## AND – Research funders can help foster Mode 2 against the powerful forces behind Mode 1

5 examples

1. Fund preparatory stages, pilot projects
  2. Fund over a sufficient period
  3. Robustly decline disciplinary projects unlikely to address challenges
  4. Referee carefully to identify novelty in combination of disciplines
  5. Evaluate excellence with impact on completion of research
- e.g. UK’s Rural Economy and Land Use Programme – Bertebos Prize 2013, 28<sup>th</sup> January presentation by the King of Sweden!  
[www.relu.ac.uk](http://www.relu.ac.uk)

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SHAPING SOCIETY