

Note

Interdisciplinary Education: The Dynamic of Societal Challenges, Knowledge Traditions and Student Interests

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Introduction

The complexity of today's world requires higher education to foster knowledgeable and critical citizens who are educated to handle uncertainty. The underlying question is: How do we cultivate this competence?

From my perspective, in contributing to the educational mission of a comprehensive research-based university like University of Oslo (UiO), the development of meaningful interdisciplinary education is framed by a dynamic of several issues including societal challenges, the long-standing knowledge traditions in our institutions and last, but not least, the interests that our students bring to the table.

My first point: development of interdisciplinary knowledge.

Interdisciplinary education is not a new idea, it reflects a long-standing discussion. Nor is it limited to higher education.

In the Norwegian curriculum from 1939 for comprehensive school we can read that: "Although the school subjects are listed separately in the timetable and the work plan, they should not be kept sharply distinct from each other in the training". Today the curriculum for primary and secondary education includes three interdisciplinary themes that reflects important societal challenges: health and life skills, democracy and citizenship, and sustainable development.

Another example is the establishment of the university in Tromsø in the 1970s up in the north of Norway. One of the most important principles that the new university was to be founded upon was that the disciplines should be merged together. Research and education should take place unhindered by the more or less arbitrary and conventional divisions of science into disciplines. Therefore, the governance structure of the University did not follow

the same pattern as the other Universities with strong independent departments. However, interdisciplinarity was far from a simple principle to implement. The resistance may be due to several factors, but one aspect, according to the first rector of the university of Tromsø Yngvar Løchen, is that it disrupts researchers' self-perceptions and the power dynamics between the fields. His book from 1985 is worth reading. Unfortunately, it is only available in Norwegian¹.

Today, the imperative for interdisciplinarity is driven by a dynamic interplay between a strong demand for innovation from both the industrial and business sectors, societal challenges related to climate change and the pursuit of sustainability as well as established knowledge traditions, institutional mindsets, and, critically, student interests.

Hence, interdisciplinary competence is key to solving future challenges which require cooperation and critical thinking across traditional disciplinary borders.

Interdisciplinarity and the Oslo conference 2025

The *The Honours Conference 2025: Students Facilitate the Future*, October 31-November 1, 2025 organized in University of Oslo itself is built upon the premise of student agency. We see a movement that reflects our time, emphasizing student agency and responsibility in education. Honours programs, such as the one at UiO (the first of its kind in Norway) demonstrate this. These programs target highly motivated students, providing them with disciplinary depth within Humanities, Social Sciences, or Mathematics and Natural Sciences while building bridges through interdisciplinary project work.

For example, current Honours cohorts at UiO tackle the complex theme of Artificial Intelligence, or AI, from different perspectives, humanities, natural sciences and social sciences. This approach ensures students engage with topics relevant to current societal and scientific debates.

Another example of themes the Honours students have worked with, is the structural loss of ecosystems and biodiversity, such as forests and wetlands, in Norway. Every minute Norway loses 79 square meters of nature. This issue is also a prime example of issues requiring integrated solutions across disciplinary fields, with engaged students wanting to make the world a better place.

However, in embracing student agency and real-world problem-solving, we must ensure that students gain a solid grasp of qualified knowledge and core concepts, moving beyond sharing everyday experiences. Academic development occurs precisely at this intersection: where established knowledge traditions meet pressing, complex societal issues.

My second point : implementing interdisciplinary education.

This highlights a significant challenge for us in the university leadership: implementing interdisciplinary education means understanding institutional and cultural barriers.

Here we stand in a double commitment:

One: The commitment to the importance of disciplinary depth. Depth that is necessary for providing long-term competence to our students. UiO's strength lies in being a comprehensive research-based university, and we are committed to defending long-term curiosity-driven fundamental research. This disciplinary depth is the foundation that allows our knowledge to be put into use.

And two: We must respond to societal expectations and the expectations from our students.

These questions are not limited to administrative structures. They are deeply cultural and institutional. Disciplinary fields often function as an anchor point for academics. It is safe, known and in a practical sense, where you are employed. On the other hand, this culture is encouraging the staff to focus on their own domain, with the mentality of "I take care of mine, and you take care of yours". But even though research is rooted in a disciplinary field, it is not narrow. It is fundamentally about actively seeking knowledge and collaboration beyond its own boundaries.

Concerning Leadership

As leaders of this university, we are committed to collaborating with our faculties to break down these barriers and find administrative solutions that support cross-boundary learning. However, transformative cultural change like this cannot be dictated by leadership alone. It must be owned, understood, and given meaning by the academics and students who drive the educational processes.

This is where initiatives like INTED (Center for Interdisciplinary Education) here at UiO (<https://www.uio.no/inted/english/>) proves its worth. INTED brings together students, academics, teachers and administrators across different fields, from humanities and social sciences to mathematics and natural sciences. They contribute to creating these meeting places between students and researchers from all over the University.

The academic culture is highly performance-oriented. Whether as a faculty member or a student, individuals find themselves in a marketplace that allocates merits, prestige, honor, positions, and public attention. While this competitive environment is a significant aspect of education and research, centres like INTED the way I see it, has potential to balance this competitiveness by fostering communities for collaboration. Creating spaces for idea-sharing, critical reasoning, and for building valid arguments and solutions are essential. Furthermore, acknowledging the value of communities of disagreement and recognizing the potential of positive outcomes of failure are crucial for addressing uncertainty and dealing with societal challenges.

My final point: the future of interdisciplinary education

Learning from our projects to scale to the entire student mass.

Honours programs and certificates are important for the university, serving as showcases for innovative solutions and collaborative measures. This conference in itself provides a platform to share models and experiences in teaching and learning within Honours programs across Europe.

As I mentioned earlier, interdisciplinary competence is key to solving future challenges. We cannot rely on our Honors students alone to solve these challenges. Our ambition must be that all students, regardless of their program, acquire the necessary interdisciplinary competence.

The methodologies developed and tested within the Honours framework, with emphasis on communication, collaboration, and digital skills, offer ideas for broader pedagogical adoption. By learning from successful elements here, we can enhance educational quality across the entire institution.

By strengthening the link between research and teaching and fostering interdisciplinary approaches, we can equip our students, all 26,000 of them, with the critical thinking and engagement needed to face global challenges. Also be reminded that innovation needs trial and error and risk-taking.

Simultaneously we must fight to keep the “biodiversity” in the student mass, although in another sense than loss of nature. I would not like to be at a university without the quiet students who just want to dig deep into their one favourite subject, as well as the students who seek a broader knowledge.

To achieve this, we need a culture of cooperation and collaboration, as few practical barriers as possible, and active students and teachers who keep challenging us and pushing us forward.

In conclusion: our ambition

The dynamic between societal challenges, knowledge traditions, and student interests is not static. Our overarching ambition is to educate competent citizens who are prepared to face global challenges. This requires the University of Oslo to follow its societal responsibility by seeking knowledge in close collaboration and interaction with stakeholders. However, the core of our commitment must be to generate knowledge that is trustworthy and academically sound. This is anchored in academic freedom, institutional autonomy and ethical standards.

In short, academic freedom is the foundation upon which we build our disciplines, which in turn ensure research-based education, equipping our students with the critical thinking necessary for the world outside the university.

By learning from the potential in programs like Honours programmes and certificates, and by systematically addressing the barriers within our institutions, we will continue the work in ensuring that UiO delivers high-quality education and contribute meaningfully to a sustainable future.

i Løchen, Yngvar, (1985): Liv og forvitring i vårt samfunn. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget. In English: “Life and erosion of our society”.