

Researchers agree interdisciplinary work makes an impact—but will collaboration flourish in the current environment?

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According to a recent author survey, the vast majority of respondents agreed that interdisciplinary research makes an impact in their field. [Tamsine O’Riordan](#) looks at how funders, institutions and publishers can respond to meet these changing research needs. For example, dedicated publishing outlets for interdisciplinary research, whether journals or monograph series offer researchers the opportunity to receive recognition for their interdisciplinary projects.



What do social scientists need to do their research most effectively? How interested are they really in interdisciplinary research, and what are the challenges that social scientists encounter when planning their research projects?

These are some of the questions that Palgrave Macmillan posed to our authors earlier in the year. Although we thought that we had a good idea of our authors’ concerns, we wanted to test our assumptions and conduct a short survey to understand how we can best support our researchers. We also wanted to share the anonymised data with the community – there is a lack of easily accessible raw data on social scientists’ perspectives online, and as a result, we have decided to share the data from this survey on Figshare under a CC BY licence ([data available here](#)).

Our survey on the [Value of the Social Sciences](#) was carried out in spring 2015 as part of our [Social Science Matters](#) campaign. The data includes 622 responses from academics (mostly book authors), 67% of whom were based in Europe, 18% in North America and 8% in Asia. Academic disciplines were well spread out: 15% came from politics, 15% from sociology, 12% from business and management, 8% from economics and finance, and 8% from language and linguistics. We realise that this data is limited. The survey was not intended to be an entirely comprehensive investigation of the issues.



Image credit: Interdisciplinary Life Sciences Building [Jujutacular](#) (Flickr CC BY-SA)

Some key findings on social scientists' stances on interdisciplinary research, in particular, include:

1. ***Authors are interested in interdisciplinary work and believe in its value.***

The vast majority of respondents (86%) agreed that interdisciplinary research makes an impact in their field. A further 49% believe that research which is interdisciplinary has a greater impact in their field than research which is not interdisciplinary. It seems that interdisciplinary research is not just a fad, or a trend that institutions are promoting without the support of their staff – researchers do genuinely believe in its benefits.

2. ***Social scientists want to work with people beyond the academy.***

Social scientists show a strong desire to move beyond traditional research circles: 73% of respondents think that research with collaborators from outside of academia is a good idea. A parallel trend appeared in our [Author Insights 2015 survey](#) conducted with Nature Publishing Group, where 40% of authors in the humanities and social sciences (HSS) said practitioners were an important group they wanted to be informed of their research. Social scientists are more open to collaboration outside academe than scientists; only 22% of scientists said the same.

3. ***Funding remains the greatest challenge, including resources for interdisciplinary work***

Respondents agreed the greatest obstacle they face is finding funding: 58% cited it as their biggest challenge, followed closely by finding time to teach. However, respondents are split on whether there are enough resources for interdisciplinary work available to them: 29% think there are not, and 28% neither agreed nor disagreed.

What do these findings on interdisciplinary work mean for the research community?

Researchers do not operate in a silo; funders, institutions and publishers are all part of the research ecosystem and each must respond to the best of its capacity to meet research needs.

Funders

For interdisciplinary research to happen at all, funding is crucial. Existing initiatives show funders' awareness of the importance of interdisciplinary research, such as Alzheimer Research UK's [Interdisciplinary Research Grant](#) to encourage scholars usually outside dementia research into the field, and the [Collaborative Awards in Humanities and Social Science](#) from the Wellcome Trust. The Wellcome Trust also shows its commitment to interdisciplinary work through [The Hub at Wellcome Collection](#), which offers both a physical space for collaboration and up to £1 million in funding which will enable a resident team of researchers to be based there for up to two years.

Institutions

Institutional backing is also vital for researchers to perform long-term interdisciplinary work, both in the form of practical help and resources (including for example space, equipment and/or funding), and active encouragement and support. The [Cooperative Research Centre for Water Sensitive Cities](#), headquartered at Monash University and with research hubs in Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Singapore, is a monumental collaborative project with over 70 research, industry and government partners to incorporate sustainable water management practices into urban environments. Smaller initiatives, such as Bournemouth University's celebratory [Interdisciplinary Research Week](#) also demonstrate the increasing value that institutions place upon interdisciplinary research.

Publishers

Publishers are well-placed to facilitate opportunities for connection, both between social scientists and other researchers, and between researchers and people outside of academia who are interested in collaborating. Our sister company Nature Publishing Group has begun to do this in partnership with Zapnito by building interactive online communities for researchers such as [npj Biofilms and Microbiomes Community](#) and [BioPharma Dealmakers](#).

Ultimately, researchers publish their work in order to advance the sum of global knowledge, ensuring that their discoveries and analyses are disseminated over the world and read by their peers and colleagues. Too often, those working on interdisciplinary research are turned away from their publisher of choice because their papers don't necessarily fit easily within the aims and scope of a series of monographs.

As publishers, we need to provide dedicated outlets for interdisciplinary research, whether journals, monograph series or mid-length research, thereby offering researchers the opportunity to receive recognition for their interdisciplinary projects. Our own efforts to find a home for interdisciplinary work include [Rethinking Interdisciplinarity across the Social Sciences and Neurosciences](#), an open access Palgrave Pivot book, and our open access flagship journal [Palgrave Communications](#) which champions multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary work (including an ongoing [collection on interdisciplinarity](#)). *Nature*, too, has published a special [issue on interdisciplinarity](#) between scientists and social scientists, underscoring our awareness of its importance within the research community and our commitment to enabling such work to continue.

We're pleased to contribute our findings to the wider community as part of the conversation around social science research, its importance and impact, and are interested to see other interpretations of the data. We intend to follow up on the insights offered from this survey and to examine new opportunities in supporting social scientists—thoughts from the community on these subjects are therefore very welcome.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

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