

Interdisciplinarity and the new REF agenda

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the system for assessing the quality of research in UK universities and higher education colleges. According to REF (2017/01), the key purposes of the REF are: to inform the selective allocation of funding for research, to provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment and to provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, for use in the higher education sector and for public information.

Within the framework of these aims, there is an air of uncertainty, even apprehension amongst universities and academics who work in these institutions. Although Hefce (2015) highlights some of the strengths associated with the REF exercise including: ‘the ability to identify and understand impact; broader strategic thinking about impact; increased recognition of individuals undertaking impact activities; the opportunity to review and reaffirm relationships with external stakeholders’, they also recognise that there are issues that academics have associated with the exercise. For example, Hefce (2015) noted that, ‘Overall, one in eight survey respondents noted no benefit from engaging in the process’. It also reported that ‘academics did voice their concern over challenges posed by the impact component of REF 2014. This is particularly important because of the implications it has for the nature of research undertaken at UK universities. A key question emerging from this source of apprehension is; would applied research now be privileged over and above basic intrinsic research? These are legitimate and logical questions which no doubt would already be engaging the minds of interdisciplinary researchers. A central question here is; what prospect do interdisciplinary researchers have in the context of the new REF agenda?

As is often said, every challenge provides opportunities. Although the REF agenda might be a source of apprehension for the wider academic community, in our view, it presents an opportunity for multidisciplinary researchers. A study by the British Academy (2016) sets out the nature of interdisciplinary studies. It starts by recognising a ‘family resemblance’ concept of interdisciplinarity, focusing on ways that it is practised, rather than a strict definition’ (British Academy, 2016, p3). Amongst the key focus of interdisciplinary research, the study suggests are; individual researchers learning methods from other areas and applying them to issues that arise in their own discipline, exploratory collaborations between disciplines to find areas of common interest – or to identify new approaches to issues within each respective discipline, to challenge- or question-focused research that requires the input of a range of disciplines working together’ (p3).

What comes out clearly from these classification of interdisciplinary research is that it will inevitably have a multi-dimensional perspective which ultimately will facilitate the accommodation of different research focus including the applied and the basic foci/dimensions of research. This in itself is an opportunity for the interdisciplinary researcher. The report further highlights one of the essential roles of interdisciplinary research as, ‘addressing complex problems and research questions posed by global social challenges, as well as the increased rigour it can bring to one’s understanding of one’s own discipline’ (BA, 2016, p4).

In spite of this seemingly endearing role of interdisciplinary research, we cannot overlook its potential problem. Central to this is the question of belonging within the context of

‘research tribes’ and its attendant debate around the creation of a research homestead. There is a legitimate argument around the need to associate with one discipline, in order to be an effective collaborator in any project that crosses disciplines. In this context, the often-offered argument is that research expertise is generally built around the knowledge of a set of methods or methodologies which serves as the foundation for a researcher to make significant contributions. Drawing on the above, it would seem natural for us to expect researchers to identify and associate with a ‘research home’. While this makes sense, it has not in any way suggested that securing a research home prevents the interdisciplinary researcher from carrying out interdisciplinary research. Rather, we suggest that the secured research homestead should really offer a protected base from which to carry out interdisciplinary research. According to BA (2016, p 5) such a base is ‘An academic home’ which consists in those critical elements that allow researchers to build a career, including expertise in core methods; a set of publications within a disciplinary area; ability to teach core courses in a discipline; and professional networks forged by attendance at conferences’ (p5).

A salient question here is; what is the relevance of the ongoing to REF. The answer is simple. The new REF agenda offers an opportunity for and recognises interdisciplinary research. According to Hefce (2017, p5), the Stern review underlined ‘the essential role of interdisciplinary research in addressing complex problems and research questions posed by global social, economic, ecological and political challenges’. Because of this, a decision has been taken to support interdisciplinary research further, in addition to the wider enhancements introduced in 2014. Amongst the support strategies set out in REF (2017/01) are that ‘each sub-panel will have at least one appointed member to oversee and participate in the assessment of interdisciplinary research submitted in that UOA’, ‘an ‘interdisciplinary identifier’ for outputs will be retained in the submission system’ and that ‘there will be a discrete section in the environment template on the submitting unit’s structures in support of interdisciplinary research’.

It is in the context of the proposed support structure presented above that we believe that the interdisciplinary researcher has come into his/her own. The challenge, therefore, must begin with the setting of each interdisciplinary researcher’s own ‘research homestead’. A driving question for this might be; what can I take across to collaborate with other researchers? In essence, there has to be some form of expertise that is taken across to interdisciplinary engagement. In essence, interdisciplinary research does not make us a mediocre or non-expert researchers. Rather, it enables us to develop our expertise in the context of the basic and to transfer it across in a dimension of applicability. What the new REF agenda has offered colleagues in the UK, who are engaged in interdisciplinary research is a chance to bring along virtues from their own research homestead to support and collaborate virtues from other homesteads. What makes this significant in the context of the REF agenda is the fact that there are colleagues who have themselves made these journeys, who are now recognised and allocated a pride of place in the decision-making process. We say, therefore, to all interdisciplinary researchers: the REF world is now your oyster. Enjoy it.

As if pre-empting this engagement with REF and interdisciplinarity, our contributors epitomise the real structure of interdisciplinary research not only in terms of the researchers but more importantly, in terms of the focus of their research and the resultant articles. John Smith and Rania Hafez danced across research homesteads to explore the concept of complexity in their article, ‘Rethinking the Concept of Social Construction from a Complexity Perspective’. The authors, having demonstrated their own expertise and confidence in researching in their own academic home took the

notion central to complexity across various realms including education, sociology and other areas. This illustrates how the opportunity offered by the new ref agenda can be fully utilised. Magaji and Ade-Ojo followed a similar path when they brought concepts and their expertise from the field of education through their use of Bloom's taxonomy to promote learning and engagement in a science classroom. Essentially, they have transferred their learning and expertise in education across to science. Ayoola and his colleagues borrowed the concept of needs analysis which is more comfortably located in the homestead of project management and applied it to the process of English teaching curriculum. Finally, Woldermeria and co. drew on the concept of effective communication strategies to explore the efficacy of research communication. Overall, in this edition, we have ample illustrations of how both concepts and methods can be taken from a secure academic base and applied within an interdisciplinary framework. This, in our view, is the way forward for us as we begin to build towards the next REF exercise. Enjoy.

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References

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