SESSION 5B
CRITERIA AND EVALUATION

FROM INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH TO ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT: ASSESSING THE SOCIETAL IMPACT OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES

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Research background

By enabling better knowledge integration across academic disciplines, interdisciplinarity holds promise for enhancing creativity and enabling groundbreaking discoveries (Carayol & Thi, 2005; Leahey et al., 2017; Leahey & Barringer, 2020). As such, stimulating interdisciplinary research has become a prominent objective in science policy, one which is often explicitly linked to the necessity of solving grand societal challenges (Huutoniemi, 2016; Mazzucato, 2018). To fully realise this potential, science policy institutions and scholars have emphasised the importance of better integrating the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) into interdisciplinary research (European Commission, 2017; Keraudren, 2018; National Academy of Sciences, 2017; Pedersen, 2016). Against the background of primarily Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)-led initiatives in interdisciplinary research (Sonetti et al., 2020), this integration is meant to ensure that interdisciplinary research produces solutions that are both impactful and societally sound, owing to their grounding in SSH frameworks (Cinar & Benneworth, 2021; European Commission, 2023).

Nonetheless, the notion that interdisciplinary research leads to greater societal impact, particularly when involving SSH, remains insufficiently substantiated (de Sandes-Guimarães et al., 2022; D'Este et al., 2019; Okamura, 2019). We contend that this oversight is particularly acute in the SSH context, owing to issues related to the tracing of societal impact and to the bibliometric measurement of interdisciplinary research involving SSH. Due to the tacit and at times intangible nature of SSH knowledge, the societal impact of SSH research is multifaceted and difficult to trace and measure (Benneworth, 2015; Bonaccorsi et al., 2021; Muhonen et al., 2020). One lens through which scholars have sought to grasp the societal impact of research is academic engagement (e.g. Bornmann, 2013; Fini et al., 2018) defined as the 'knowledge-related interactions of academic scientists with external organisations' (Perkmann et al., 2021, p.1). However, this literature has been criticised for focusing almost exclusively on STEM disciplines, at the risk of understating the societal impact of SSH research by overlooking specific modes of engagement prevailing in the SSH context (Cunningham et al., 2024; Olmos-Peñuela, Benneworth, et al., 2014). In line with these concerns, an expanding body of literature shows that while SSH researchers are unlikely to engage in intellectual property licensing or firm creation to the same extent as their STEM colleagues (Olmos-Peñuela, Castro-Martinez, et al., 2014), they generate societal impact through a plurality of academic engagement activities. These include not only consulting and contract research, but also joint research, personnel mobility, training activities, publication and dissemination activities (Cunningham et al., 2024; Giménez-Toledo et al., 2023; Jacob & Jabrane, 2018).

Measuring the societal impact of interdisciplinarity within the SSH context is further challenged by bibliometric complexities. SSH research, more so than research produced by other fields, does not necessarily appear in international journals but appears often instead in national journals, book chapters or monographs (Archambault & Larivière, 2010; Sivertsen & Larsen, 2012). As a result, bibliographic coverage of SSH disciplines in the main commercial databases (e.g. Web of Science and Scopus) does not effectively capture outputs from SSH research (Sīle et al., 2018; Wilder &

Walters, 2021). This also means that SSH research tends to rely less on journal citations and to use instead more diverse citation sources which are often insufficiently covered by the main commercial databases. Making use of citation-based methods for measuring interdisciplinary is therefore cited as inadequate for the SSH context (Larivière et al., 2006).

Objective

Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to contribute to the study of the societal impact of interdisciplinary research in the SSH context through the lens of academic engagement. We aim to answer the following research question: Does engagement in interdisciplinary research lead to greater involvement in academic engagement activities among SSH researchers?

Data

To ensure satisfactory coverage of SSH research outputs, we rely on bibliographic metadata from the Flemish Academic Bibliographic Database for the Social Sciences and Humanities (VABB-SHW). To accurately reflect the main modes of academic engagement through which SSH researchers intend to generate societal impact, we draw upon recent literature addressing the nature of academic engagement in the SSH context (Cunningham et al., 2024; Giménez-Toledo et al., 2023). For each mode, we collected data signalling participation in a representative type of activity, including contract research (Strategic Basic Research projects of the Flanders Research Foundation), co-publications with non-academic stakeholders, book publications geared towards general audiences, and business chairs.

Method

We rely on an established methodological framework to identify interdisciplinary research and researchers. By calculating a diversity index (Hill-type diversity), we quantify the extent to which individual SSH researchers engage in interdisciplinary research. This diversity framework is applied to the disciplinary classifications of researchers' publication track records, as covered in VABB-SHW, to assess interdisciplinary diversity. The disciplinary classification is based on cognitive classification, which considers the actual content of the publication venue rather than the researcher's organisational affiliation. Finally, we develop a statistical model to test associations between interdisciplinary research and the academic engagement activities of SSH researchers, as exemplified by the four activities presented above.

Expected results and contribution

Our study will assess whether higher engagement in interdisciplinary research is associated with higher engagement in different academic engagement activities. Our study will further contribute to the literature by providing a categorisation of academic engagement activities in the SSH context based on four modes: response, co-production, cooperation and dissemination.

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