

Code of Conduct for Interdisciplinary Cooperation (Borstel memorandum)

Preamble

All science addressing issues of relevance to human societies (such as infectious diseases, biodiversity conservation, climate change, migration, education, nutrition, public health or communication technology) is complex and often necessitates cooperations between disciplines. These can be fraught with unforeseen problems regarding mutual expectations and the stability and productivity of partnerships. To ensure a lasting, sustainable impact, researchers, policy-makers, industry and government officers need to establish stable, durable links with each other. The associated “clash of cultures” requires a level of diplomacy and engagement on all sides that need sustained institutional, financial support. Adherence to the following Code of Conduct for Interdisciplinary Cooperation will facilitate fruitful interactions and maximize the chances of a productive outcome of partnerships.

Ten golden rules for good interdisciplinary practice

1. Ensure that you have all necessary disciplines on board. Define and agree with all partners on the overall joint goal, desired impact of the collaboration (“mission”) and a suitable structure. Expectations must be clearly stated, underlying concepts should not be hazy or confusing.
2. While disciplinary depth is essential, breadth of vision is critical. Looking beyond the borders of one’s discipline requires an open-mindedness and willingness that takes time and effort to cultivate.
3. Ensure equal respect and appreciation by all for the norms, theories and approaches of all participating disciplines. Avoid dominant behaviors and settings.
4. Ensure that all partners play a meaningful role. All partners need to be able to identify with the goal of and their roles in the project. Assign responsibilities, clarify quality and quantity of accountability, specify rights of data access and ownership, and right of representation.
5. Constructive dialogue requires the commitment to interact in plain language and leaving the unnecessary jargon of your own discipline behind.
6. Evaluate the costs and benefits of your partnerships, and be honest about your stress tolerance. Do not problematize cultural diversity unnecessarily, but do not shy away from openly addressing problems either.
7. Successful communication is at the core of each project’s success. Create and set aside space and time for person to person interactions and unconventional settings. Ensure that all partners regularly reflect on what works and how communication in meetings, seminars or internet platforms can be improved. Seek professional guidance for sustained development of the collaborative process.
8. Pair disciplines and provide sufficient time, space and (wo)manpower to supervise and empower junior researchers to meet the challenges posed by interdisciplinary work.
9. External perspectives and mentoring can be very useful for feedback and encouragement. Relax: nobody is an expert on everything in an interdisciplinary collaboration – a view from the outside can provide a more realistic view on what is possible and feasible.
10. Develop a joint suitable and sensible publication strategy. Since careers are built on high-impact papers relevant to every partner’s core discipline, this joint strategy may include highly-ranked monodisciplinary journals in different fields.