



LLAKES is an ESRC-funded research centre led by the Institute of Education, University of London

Managing an Interdisciplinary Research Centre

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Key Functions of an Interdisciplinary Research Centre

- Develop a long-term vision of where you can make advances through interdisciplinary research – what research questions can only be answered through an inter-disciplinary approach? How will it enhance the field?
- Assemble an interdisciplinary team with people who are strong in their own disciplines and some who are experienced in border-crossing interdisciplinary work.
- Build capacity in mixed-method and interdisciplinary work among younger researchers.
- Build capacity among policy makers for understanding and using your research evidence.
- Create a management and operational structure for the centre which maximizes the possibilities of synergies across different research projects.
- Rigorous monitoring of progress on research projects and delivery of high quality research outputs.
- A continual focus on generating impact.
- Generation of new research income.

Transcending the Disciplinary Silos

- Our vision for LLAKES was to be a world-leading centre for interdisciplinary research on lifelong learning and its effects on economic competitiveness and social cohesion. These are large and complex themes and required an array of approaches.
- Education research is often criticised for being overly fragmented – for having too many small and specialised research projects, each occurring in their disciplinary silos, which fail to accumulate a systematic body of knowledge.
- LLAKES sought to integrate and synthesise relevant research findings from a variety of fields and disciplines.
- We aimed to put the study of learning at the heart of the social sciences, and to bring all the richness of the different social sciences to bear on the study of learning.

Interdisciplinary Research

Interdisciplinary research is more often advocated than genuinely practised - perhaps because it is challenging and resource-intensive, and because it demands researchers to venture out from their usual comfort zones and work together in teams with new concepts and methods.

LLAKES was well-placed to take up this challenge. We had a critical mass of leading academics - from comparative sociology, anthropology, economics, education, social psychology, and social geography - who were genuinely committed to traversing the disciplinary boundaries.

Increasingly our research projects drew on diverse disciplines, using mixed methods and multiple levels of analysis. The approach has already produced some highly original work and we believe it can do much more.

Challenges of Interdisciplinary Research

- To conduct effective interdisciplinary research you need a research team with a diversity of people who are strong in their own different disciplines. You also need a core of people who are used to working across disciplines.
- Team members need to be acquainted - or willing to become acquainted - with the core concepts and methods of disciplines other than their own. They need to have curiosity about other disciplines and be methodologically open minded. Mutual respect for the contribution of different disciplines is essential but it doesn't come easy to all disciplinary practitioners.
- Some researchers are nervous of going outside the comfort zone of their own discipline. Researchers need to be able to explain their premises and methods of their disciplines clearly – to be willing to share the tricks of their trade.
- You also need to clear idea of why taking an interdisciplinary approach is going to help. What problems can it solve that cannot be solved by a mono-disciplinary approach.
- Some researchers will always worry that journals are discipline-based and sometimes skeptical about inter-disciplinary and mixed method approached.

LLAKES' Initial Approach to Developing an Interdisciplinary Centre

- The Centre for Learning and Life Chances began in 2008, after a successful bid lead by the IOE to the 2006 ESRC call for Centres.
- This specified Lifelong Learning as a priority, suggesting a focus on either the social or economic outcomes of learning. We proposed a centre which would research both economic and social outcomes and, in particular, how policies for lifelong learning could mediate between policies for economic competitiveness and social cohesion.
- The IOE Department for Lifelong and Comparative Education had an exceptional concentration of expertise in post-compulsory and adult learning. A number of us had previously conducted research on the social or economic outcomes of learning. I had been a co-founder and co-director of the DFE-funded *Wider Benefits of Learning Centre* which had already produced a body of research on the social benefits of learning.
- We were able to assemble a team – from IOE, NIESR and other partner institutions - which was both highly interdisciplinary and experienced in comparative and mixed-method research.

LLAKES Phase One Research (2008-2012)

LLAKES was launched in the midst of the 2008 Financial Crisis so immediately our research was framed by a raft of new macro issues concerned the global economy, housing bubbles, dodgy lending practices etc, and the broader crisis of globalization etc - so we had little choice but take a broad perspective on issues.

Our initial premise was that within social democratic countries there were a number of policies which enhanced both economic competitiveness and social cohesion and that the two could be mutually reinforcing.

The challenge was to see how lifelong learning could enhance both and we had a number of mixed method projects which looked at the dynamics of different lifelong learning systems and sought to assess the contributions of their different system characteristics to learning outcomes and social and economic outcomes.

The crisis and subsequent Austerity reduced the policy space for developing such dual policies and we did have to adapt our research programme to some extent to take account of this.

Phase One Research Plan

The Centre's contracted objectives were to make major advances in scientific knowledge in the thematic areas which constitute the three strands of its research:

- Strand 1: Models of Lifelong Learning and the Knowledge Society
- Strand 2: Regenerating City-Regions: Learning Environments, Knowledge Transfer and Innovative Pedagogy
- Strand 3: Learning and Life Chances throughout the Life Course

Successful Interdisciplinary Research Projects

- Francis Green's analysis (RP 20) of the different definitions of skill used by economists, sociologists and psychologists has led to a more integrated 'functional' concept of skill which encapsulates its 'productive', 'expandable' and 'social' characteristics.
- Comparative research by Green and Mustafa, using PISA data, was able to show the social and economic benefits of enhancing pre-school education and care. Reductions in education inequality; higher mean skills of learners leading to higher productivity and tax returns; raising employment rates of mothers of young children which also raised taxed returns which could cover costs of reforms.

Regimes of Social Cohesion

- Green and Janmaat's book ('Regimes of Social Cohesion: Societies and the Crisis of Globalisation') used a fully interdisciplinary and mixed-method mode of analysis to identify the characteristics of different forms of social cohesion in western and East Asian states.
- A comparative analysis of contemporary policy documents and key historical works in sociology and political philosophy was used to develop a theory of the different intellectual traditions of social cohesion, whilst an analysis of the literature in comparative political economy provides evidence for hypotheses regarding the institutional foundations of contemporary regimes of social cohesion.
- Subsequent statistical analysis using international administrative and survey data on institutions and social attitudes broadly confirmed the existence of the different regimes and their key characteristics.
- The theory of regimes, combined with an analysis of long-term international trends on indicators of social cohesion, such as civic participation and trust, allowed us to identify where cohesion was most vulnerable in different countries as the effects of the financial crisis unfolded, and accurately predicted the nature of civil unrest which has occurred in English cities this summer.
- The book was one of the first to give currency and substance to the term 'crisis of globalisation.'

LLAKES Two Interdisciplinary Research Programme

LLAKES Phase Two needed a new leading theme which could be advanced by interdisciplinary study. We also needed a new structure that encouraged multi-level, mixed method working across all projects. The final structure looked like this:

- **Theme 1: Youth, Inter-generational Mobility, and Civic Values (led by Ingrid Schoon with: Chiara Rosazza Bondibene, Claire Callender, Richard Dorsett, Michela Franceschelli, Alison Fuller, Andy Green, David Guile, Bryony Hoskins, Germ Janmaat, Avril Keating, Pauline Leonard, Geoff Mason, Nicola Pensiero, Cinzia Rienza, Ingrid Schoon, Martin Weale, and Rachel Wilde).**
- **Theme 2: Learning, Work and the Economy (led by Francis Green with: Chiara Rosazza Bondibene, Alan Felstead, Alison Fuller, Duncan Gallie, David Guile, Susan Halford, Golo Henseke, Kate Lyle, Geoff Mason, Nicola Pensiero, Rebecca Riley, Anna Vignoles, and Rachel Wilde).**
- **Theme 3: Education, Inequality and Social Cohesion (led by Germ Janmaat with: Michela Franceschelli, Andy Green, Francis Green, Bryony Hoskins, Andrew Jenkins, Nicola Pensiero, Lucinda Platt, Peter Taylor-Gooby, Anna Vignoles, Susanne Wiborg, and Rachel Wilde).**

Within each theme research is carried out at multiple levels (individual level; regional; national) and with interdisciplinary teams. Much of the research is mixed method.

Theme One Projects

- Intergenerational Dynamics in Learning Engagement, Life Chances and Well-Being of Young People (led by I. Schoon)
- The Crisis for Contemporary Youth: Young People, Opportunities and Civic Values (A. Green)
- Getting in and Getting on in the Youth Labour Market: Entry Practices, Under-Employment and Skill Formation in Regional Economies (Fuller and Leonard)
- Student Debt, Higher Education Participation and Intermediate Skills Development (Callender and Mason)

Theme Two Projects

- Skills, Innovation and Economic Growth (Mason)
- Inter-Professional Learning in the Creative and Cultural Sector (Guile)
- Work Organisation, Lifelong Learning and Employee-Driven Innovation in the Health Sector (Fuller and Halford)
- Skill and Job Quality: The Workers' Perspective (F. Green)
- Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: A Longitudinal Analysis (F. Green)

Theme Three projects

- Causes and Dynamics of the Unequal Distribution of Skills among Adults: A Cross-Country Analysis (led by A. Green)
- Comparative Analysis of Early Childhood Cognitive Outcomes (led by Lucinda Platt)
- Lifelong Learning Systems, Equality and Civic Values (led by Germ Janmaat)
- The Effects of Private and Quasi-Private Schooling on Society (led by F. Green)

Building Capacity amongst Researchers and Policy Makes

- Inter-Strand/Theme Workshops to encourage synergies across projects.
- Public Seminars and conferences to disseminate research findings both internally and externally (130 seminars; 8 conferences to date)
- “Masterclass” sessions for policy-makers, run in conjunction with UKCES and BIS to provide research evidence context to current policy issues (15 to date).
- Sending research associates on training courses.
- Recruiting PhD students

Generating Academic and Societal Impact

Generating academic impact for a well-resourced centre should be taken as axiomatic. LLAKES publication outputs since 2008 have included: 17 Books; 140 Journal articles; 46 Book Chapters and 56 LLAKES Research Papers. A reasonable number of these have received extensive research media coverage.

Generating Societal Impact is much more difficult. Best practice is to:

- Involve relevant policy makers at national, local and sectoral levels early on.
- Invest heavily in disseminating findings with the appropriate ones (preferably with assistance of experienced and well-connected communications officers and journalists). Issue regular press releases and take up invitation to provide media commentary.
- Continually collect evidence of impact which is synthesized in Impact Case Studies for REF.

However, the process is highly time consuming and takes energies away from conducting the research. Also the whole endeavor introduces contradictory priorities and can be highly compromising to academics who believe in academic freedom and independent research.

- Generating societal impact involves publishing rapidly through research papers. Academic target requires slow process of publishing through academic journals.
- The most convincing evidence of impact is to be able to show that policy-makers have considered your research and, ultimately that it has contributed to changes in policy. The best way to achieve this is to tell the policy-makers what they want to hear. This compromises research independence and integrity.....

Winning Additional Research Funding

A successful research Centre needs a certain critical mass to really add value above the normal run of individualized academic research. This means continually winning new research grants.

In the current university climate you are only as good as your last grant. If you don't continue to bring in new grants you risk losing the leverage in the institution necessary delivering large scale research – i.e. cooperation on provision of facilities and efficient recruitment procedures etc. Also risk losing temp staff.

In principle research centres are well placed to win research funding because they have already passed quality control assessment by the prestigious funding bodies that award their core funding. This makes them more likely to get additional grants through so-called leveraged funding. LLAKES raised £3.5 m since 2008.

However, research grant applications take time and can distract from completion of existing projects. They are also becoming harder to get in the UK.

My best advance on applications is:

- Pick grant calls where you have a competitive advantage;
- Make sure you have genuinely original and relevant research questions and work out rigorous methods for answering them;
- Assemble your best possible team.