

# INTER-DISCIPLINARITY

LUS ADVICE



## MINORS

### Harmonisation

Harmonising the minor spaces among faculties. E.g. having all minors in the 1st semester, worth 30 ECTS.

### Accessibility

Clearly communicating for which audience the minor is suitable.

## ONLINE KNOWLEDGE HUB

Offering a **flexible** and **accessible** way to the knowledge hub that exists at Leiden University

Could take the form of a semi-public video platform

## RESEARCH AND TEACHING

In order for students to study in an interdisciplinary environment, it is necessary to encourage interdisciplinary teaching and research.

## SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Be aware of the importance of personal interactions and connections in interdisciplinary environments

## QUESTIONS?

For more info, please refer to the report, or contact [lus@sea.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:lus@sea.leidenuniv.nl)



## Interdisciplinarity

The following report is based on brainstorm sessions held among the LUS members, conversations with relevant employees of Leiden University, and a meeting with six study association representatives. The report is by no means representative, but rather aims to provide general thoughts and shows a student perspective on the topic of interdisciplinarity.

The report is divided along the following topics: relevancy, research and teaching, social environments, minors, honours and flexible and accessible knowledge. If you have questions about this report, the LUS can be contacted at: [lus@sea.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:lus@sea.leidenuniv.nl)

First and foremost, it is important to explain what the LUS understood as interdisciplinarity in the process of writing this report. While interdisciplinarity has the definition:

“Involving two or more academic, scientific, or artistic disciplines” (Merriam-Webster)

and

“Of or pertaining to two or more disciplines or branches of learning; contributing to or benefiting from two or more disciplines” (Oxford English Dictionary)

Our (the LUS’) interpretation of interdisciplinarity is when one or more disciplines work together and encourage students to think and learn beyond their own study. Real societal issues are always interdisciplinary, hence, if the university wants to educate students in a manner that prepares them to work with these societal topics, they need to foster the necessary skills and knowledge. In general, we see that with regards to interdisciplinarity, skills for application seem to be more important than knowledge alone. Knowledge can always be looked up, whereas the skill of how-to bring people with different backgrounds together or how to work in a team or under uncertainty, are skills that need to be practised and that are necessary in an interdisciplinary world.

### *Why do we consider interdisciplinarity as relevant?*

There are some topics, such as those relating to the environment but also to security and many more, that require input from many disciplines and faculties to achieve complete knowledge capture and teach students how to approach the preparation of actionable solutions. In real life, problems are not structured along the lines of studies or faculties but require a diversity of insights. This means that if the university wants to train students in a way that they are prepared to work on real-world issues, they require interdisciplinary teaching and education. Besides this practical reason, university is also a place for fostering curiosity. Appealing to the curiosity of people and allowing them access to high quality exposure necessarily asks for the opportunity to learn in an interdisciplinary environment.

### *Research and teaching:*

Students who want to pursue interdisciplinarity need teachers who have an interdisciplinary mindset. To for example set up an interdisciplinary course requires teachers to have the necessary skills and knowledge, but to also have connections with teachers from for example other faculties. It is not the place of this report to advise on interdisciplinarity in research and teaching, but we do advise to look further into it with those working in research and teaching to see how to encourage further development in this area.

### *Social environments:*

Interdisciplinary environments also bring challenges with them. People with different backgrounds might have different expectations of how things ought to work, but also students face the challenge of

“not knowing”, meaning students are likely to have different knowledge gaps if they work outside of the main field. While working in such an environment is in itself already a good lesson, to make it a successful one it is important that it takes place in a way that it does not contribute to further stress and in a way that makes it an enjoyable experience for all involved. Therefore, the personal working interactions/personal connection between students and lecturers is of special importance. The LUS’ advice to people involved in setting up interdisciplinary courses is that they take that into account. This can concern the class size, the number of teaching staff but also the general mind-set towards creating such an environment. A smaller class size for example means that teachers can better assist students in filling the knowledge gaps they might have due to their different backgrounds, and a better connection between students and teachers also means a more inviting environment for questions. A good social environment in which there are positive personal connection between teachers, between students and between teachers and students is not only important for interdisciplinarity but can also have many other positive effects, among others related to well-being.

#### *Minors:*

Minors are an important piece of the puzzle of interdisciplinarity. There already is a diversity of interdisciplinary minors on offer, which we think is very positive. However, we discovered some issues surrounding the accessibility of minors, regarding the harmonisation of minors. The faculties that do not offer a minor space for students in the first semester each academic year, but that rather work with a minor space divided over the two semesters, or even work with less than 30 EC worth of free space, make it very difficult for students to choose a minor outside of their own study/faculty. Discouraging students to look beyond their own field is unfortunate, and there could be a lot of gain from harmonising the minor space among studies and faculties.

Deciding whether minors are possible/open to everyone is an important distinction to make, as we have identified the following predicament: if you open minors to everyone you may be required to reduce the level of complexity and detail that you offer and thus the minor may no longer be relevant to those students already studying the programme from which the minor was offered. Equally, if the minor has a high level of complexity and requires specific pre-requisite knowledge it will no longer be accessible to those following another study programme, and the opportunity to engage in interdisciplinary learning is significantly reduced. In general, it is worth considering whether more minors/ classes could become more accessible.

A possible solution to this is to offer a mix of complex, programme specific minors as well as more general minors which are offered by a single faculty, or through collaboration of multiple faculties, that are accessible to all students. Furthermore, by communicating clearly for which audience a minor is designed, it can be prevented that students are either bored or over-challenged.

#### *Honours classes:*

As previously described with respect to minors, there exists among Honours Classes a trade-off around quality versus accessibility. This seems to be a trade-off that needs to be accepted, and communication of entry requirements is key.

In general, we have determined that some of the currently offered Honours Classes are a good example of where interdisciplinarity can be integrated into the landscape of the university. They encourage inter-faculty discussion and collaboration while giving students a better understanding of how they can apply their specific specialisation to broader applications. An example is the Master Honours class *Circular Economy – from challenge to opportunity*.

We recommend that more interdisciplinary Honours Classes are developed going forward. The concept of the Master Honours Classes, in that they are open to all interested students, is a concept we like and

think that it could become more common and well-advertised, also for bachelor Honours Classes (if capacities allow).

### *Making knowledge accessible*

In general, while working on the topic, we noticed that students are very much interested in learning things that lie outside of their field. While minors, honours classes, and taking electives are good opportunities, they all have in common that they are not very flexible and require quite some commitment and time from students. For this reason, we have come up with an idea that is open, flexible and could contribute to the university being a future-proof place of knowledge and curiosity. The idea is to establish a sort of video platform where videos on different topics could be uploaded. It could be introductory lectures, a lecture series, researchers presenting their research or also recordings of guest lectures. Participation should of course be voluntarily and not without consent. While some parts of the platform might be only accessible when logging in with a Leiden account, other parts could also be made available to the public and could serve as a means of promotion for Leiden.

### *Conclusion*

The above recommendations consist of small and big changes. Some are concrete changes such as the harmonisation of minor spaces, others are more abstract such as the development of positive social environments. The development of interdisciplinarity at Leiden University will require many different steps, but overall, it is important to keep the conversation going, stay in touch with each other and to be open to try new ideas. Interdisciplinarity is in the view of the LUS an important cornerstone of making the university future-proof.