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RELU: The International Context

Research agendas similar to those of RELU have been initiated by many international bodies, as well as many non-UK national and regional (e.g. European) funding agencies and international foundations. This project reviewed these initiatives to identify progress and best practice with regard to mechanisms for establishing interdisciplinary research, for capacity building in interdisciplinary science and in transferring knowledge to stakeholders and policy makers.

Those programmes with the closest fit to the aims and objectives of RELU were identified using an objective scoring procedure and 174 questionnaires were sent out to these organisations, 47 (27%) of which were returned, providing information on the degree and nature of the disciplines involved, the motivations for interdisciplinarity and individual experiences about what factors promoted success of these programmes as well as whether there were any barriers to interdisciplinarity.

Findings of the questionnaire survey indicate that for the majority of international programmes which share common aims and objectives to RELU, leadership, participant commitment, respect, trust, time and resources, and common frameworks are all important in making interdisciplinarity work. Barriers to interdisciplinary research included poor career rewards, the nature of funding cultures and a lack of trust between participants from different disciplines.

Building groups of researchers with these attributes is not easy and is probably self-selecting: those with the necessary vision who are also ready and willing to put the time and energy into such research will be those who make interdisciplinary projects succeed. The nature of the barriers to interdisciplinarity declared by the respondents, especially academic success, implies that there may be a greater risk involved in working in interdisciplinary research for early stage researchers than for well-established researchers. The presence of such barriers is likely to slow the building of a RELU-type interdisciplinary community within the UK.

Several specific mechanisms for facilitating interdisciplinarity in programmes like RELU emerged from analyses, in particular, the use of clear language without jargon, regular face-to-face informal meetings, availability of forums to facilitate discussions, regular self-evaluation and learning sessions and the use of participatory methods. These help to establish a team philosophy, promoted further by sharing of all information and data freely and agreeing ground rules on intellectual property in advance, especially authorship on published outputs.