

# Institutionalising

## Encyclopedia Entry

**Author(s):**

[Vienni Baptista, Bianca](#) 

**Publication date:**

2024-06-20

**Permanent link:**

<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000685401>

**Rights / license:**

[Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International](#)

**Originally published in:**

Elgar Encyclopedias in the Social Sciences series, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035317967.ch59>

**Funding acknowledgement:**

201582 - Investigating interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity: Intersections of practices, culture(s) and policy in collaborative knowledge production (SNF)

## 59. Institutionalising

### Abstract

Increased interest in interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity has heightened calls for institutionalising structures and strategies that cross boundaries of expertise both within and beyond the academy. A multitude of strategies and models of change emerged along different subthemes: spanning different historical and geographical contexts, temporal and spatial organization of research and teaching, degrees of change from modifications to transformations, theories or philosophies of institutional change, and factors helping or hindering institutionalising processes and dynamics. Given the heterogeneity of practices, we should not impose a universal definition of the term “institutionalisation”. Institutionalising is here conceptualised as a verb. Therefore, embedding inter- and transdisciplinarity in organisational structures is best thought of as a process, which does not follow a predetermined formula. However, the strategies and models of institutionalising can be designed, implemented, reframed and/or analysed along four practical dimensions and questions: epistemic, cultural, organisational and strategic. This framework is useful for tackling continuing and future challenges posed by different relations at the intersections of cultures, institutions, and communities in institutionalising inter- and transdisciplinarity.

### Keywords

Higher education; Institutionalising; Dynamics; Collaboration; Communities

### Challenges of institutionalising interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary initiatives

Different communities and governments have undergone short and longer-term transformations with the aim of institutionalising inter- and transdisciplinarity. This leads to some questions: How, then, should institutionalising proceed in light of this and other challenges? What do we expect from universities and research centres that aim to foster interdisciplinary and transdisciplinarity in current times?

The creation of organisational structures focused on interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge is a challenge for higher education institutions on all continents (Vienni-Baptista et al., 2022). Traditional university structures either based on disciplinary departments or in professional schools come into conflict a priori with the creation of organisational structures that cross-cut boundaries among disciplines, sectors (e.g., industry) and actors.

The institutionalisation processes of inter- and transdisciplinarity have been studied since the 1960s, when the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) organised the first seminar to discuss the issue of interdisciplinarity at universities (Apostel et al., 1972). The report that resulted from this seminar forecasted an increasing interest in interdisciplinarity and predicted the complexity of the research contexts that required – and still do today – greater institutional synergies to embed interdisciplinary initiatives within institutions (Apostel et al., 1972). Since then, an increasing number of studies have analysed the challenges of inter- and transdisciplinarity at the institutional level (e.g., Klein, 2010; Weingart, 2014).

One of the main limitations of institutionalisation processes is that these usually do not consider the organisational arrangement of higher education institutions and the culture(s) involved (Klein, 2010). Inter- or transdisciplinary arrangements challenge or are challenged by regulatory, cognitive and normative factors (Holley, 2009). The challenges of institutionalising inter- and transdisciplinarity may be classified following the different university functions (research, teaching, outreach and knowledge transfer), taking into account that regulatory, cognitive and normative dimensions cut across institutional practices. Examples can be found in Vienni-Baptista and Rojas-Castro (2019) and Vienni-Baptista et al. (2018). Holley (2009) divided institutional practices into three main strategies: (1) development of an organisational structure that favours interdisciplinary research, (2) support through competitive funds for interdisciplinary activities and (3) the development of an interdisciplinary culture promoting this type of activity.

Across contexts, neoliberal and internal pressures on the scientific system still act as hindrances to achieving the full potential of inter- and transdisciplinarity in research and

teaching in higher education. Neoliberal policies have long limited and discouraged such research practices by legitimising individualism and shortening the timelines for research and learning (Vienni-Baptista et al., 2022). Previous and current studies have called for transforming and restructuring higher education while arguing that universities' potential to solve societal problems has not been fully reached (Darbellay et al., 2016; Jantsch, 1972; Klein, 2010; Weingart, 2014; among many others). It was also found that there is still little impact of interdisciplinarity on the organisation of universities (Vienni-Baptista & Rojas-Castro, 2019).

Programmes dedicated to both forms of research and education are often marginalised in the discipline-dominated system of higher education, and individuals often face obstacles to career advancement. If not institutionalised, even the most promising models and strategies – including prestigious research centres and institutes – become marginalised and lack long-term sustainability. In addition, many programmes lack adequate resources and administrative support, let alone recognition in the academic reward system or good prospects for early-career researchers. Moreover, few universities have instituted comprehensive portfolios for change that require attention to the micro, meso and macro levels while encompassing both bottom-up and top-down initiatives (Klein et al., 2022). Researchers, lecturers and practitioners all invest a great deal of effort in “reinventing” successful organisational structures that are usually supported only in the short term because of a lack of long-term funding, support and legitimation and narrow criteria of evaluation. Even successful initiatives are not systematised, nor are their lessons widely shared (Klein et al., 2022).

However, there has been evidence of change. Some universities have started implementing structural transformations to institutionalise the concepts of inter- and transdisciplinarity. A growing body of structures and strategies is illuminating how inter- and transdisciplinarity are being successfully embedded into systems of research and higher education across the globe and academic experts' relationships with external stakeholders, including government, industry and civil society (see examples from different continents in Vienni-Baptista et al., 2022).

## Institutionalising as a verb

Given the heterogeneity of practices, we should not impose a universal definition of the term “institutionalisation”. Instead, we aim to provide a common framework for tackling continuing and future challenges posed by different relations at the intersections of cultures, institutions and communities in institutionalising inter- and transdisciplinarity. Because embedding inter- and transdisciplinarity in organisational structures is a process, not a predetermined formula, “institutionalising” can be conceptualised as a verb. The term then refers to dynamics beyond the static connotation of a noun associated with buildings, organisational charts and fixed objectifications of ideas and goals (Klein et al., 2022).

Evidence shows that the formats for institutionalising inter- and transdisciplinary research and teaching in higher education are dynamic and context based (Vienni-Baptista et al., 2018; Vienni-Baptista & Rojas-Castro, 2019). Therefore, mobilising inter- and transdisciplinarity requires an awareness of the organisational dynamics of implementation conducive to inter- and transdisciplinarity on both temporal and spatial scales (Klein et al., 2022).

## Pathways to institutionalising cultures and communities

The strategies and models of institutionalising can be designed, implemented, reframed and/or analysed along four practical dimensions and questions (based on Vienni-Baptista et al., 2022):

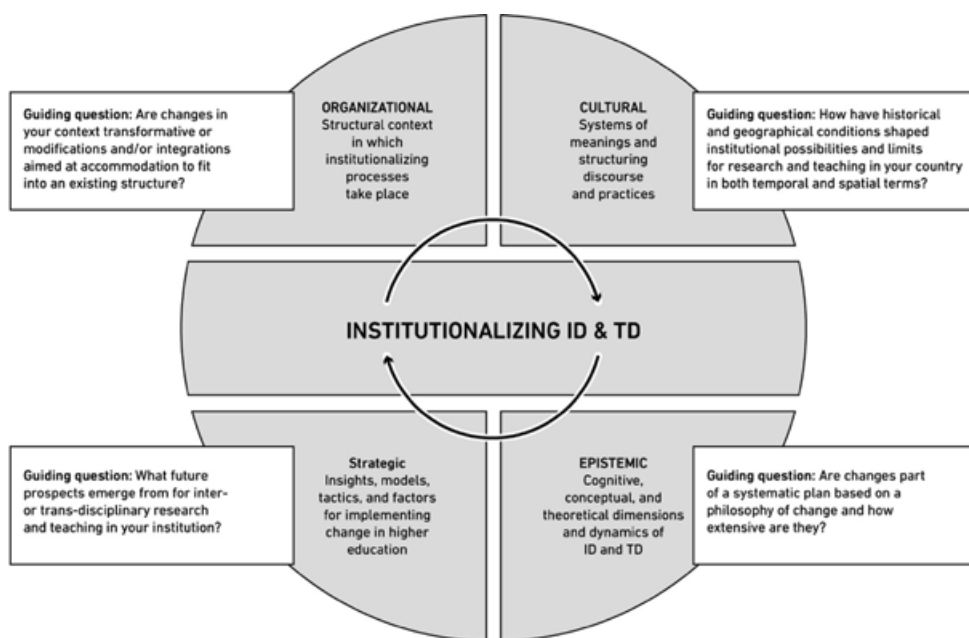
1. **Epistemic:** This dimension centres on the cognitive and conceptual aspects of inter- and transdisciplinarity. The guiding question is, “Are the changes part of a systemic plan based on a philosophy of change, and how extensive are they?”
2. **Cultural:** This focuses on the linkages and intersections between inter- or transdisciplinary meanings, discourses, communities and practices. The guiding question is, “How have historical and geographical conditions shaped institutional possibilities and limits for research and teaching in your country in both temporal and spatial terms?”

3. **Organisational:** The structural context in which institutionalising processes take place together with communities of practice constitutes the third dimension. The guiding question is, “Are changes in your context transformative or modifications and/or integration processes aimed at accommodation to fit into an existing structure?”
4. **Strategic:** This dimension collects insights and successful aspects that can be implemented to promote inter- and transdisciplinarity in future scenarios. The guiding question is, “What future prospects emerge from and for inter- or transdisciplinary research and teaching in your institution?”

These dimensions can be consolidated into a framework for thinking about and transforming institutional and cultural conditions for inter- and transdisciplinary research and teaching in higher education (Figure 59.1). This instrument can be adapted to different research and educational settings, rather than imposing a universal method of a model that ignores local contexts.

These dimensions synthesise the main questions that need to be taken into account when institutionalising inter- and transdisciplinarity. By exploring these questions, groups can find ways to address those factors acting as negative conditions for institutionalising, and, in turn, transform them into positive ways and sites for change. The factors are related to each of the four dimensions and guide the discussion when using this framework by pointing to more detailed aspects of institutionalising processes. Some examples are as follows (based on Vienni-Baptista et al., 2022):

1. For the epistemic dimension:
  - how the different understandings of inter- or transdisciplinarity are embedded within the institution or the group applying the framework;
  - dimensions and levels of integration;
  - problems and obstacles;
  - the legitimacy of the organisation and power imbalances existing within it;
  - collaborations and formats;
  - methods and tools of coproduction.



Source: Vienni-Baptista et al., 2022.

Figure 59.1 A heuristic framework for institutionalising inter- and transdisciplinary research and teaching: dimensions for institutionalising

2. For the cultural dimension:
  - how the different systems of meanings structure discourses and practices;
  - local and contextual conditions for institutionalising inter- or transdisciplinary initiatives;
  - time frames and spaces in which institutionalising processes were developed;
  - research, teaching or outreach activities to be institutionalised.
3. For the organisational dimension:
  - identifying the features of the structural context in which the institutionalising process takes/took place;
  - communities of practice involved or to be built;
  - practices and policies influencing the process;
  - influence of idea of “impact” and “excellence”;
  - funding schemes supporting or hindering the institutionalising process;
  - types of institutional formats.
4. For the strategic dimension:
  - identifying insights, models, tactics and new factors for implementing change in higher education;
  - kind and degree of the changes to be implemented or of those that have been successfully implemented;
  - aligning strategies may also be identified as a means to improve them or reflect on them within the framework;
  - evaluation and reward system for inter- or transdisciplinary initiatives;
  - roles of students or early-career researchers within the institutionalising process;
  - engagement of stakeholders;
  - contextualisation of approaches and models.

Because it consists of a heuristic set of dimensions that trigger self-reflective processes in teams, this framework can be applied at any phase of institutionalising. These questions offer a means to rethink or imagine how inter- and transdisciplinary initiatives are (or will be) embedded in institutions and with which purposes. They can be adapted to planning or transforming different research and educational settings (Vienni-Baptista et al., 2022).

The result is an overview of conditions under which inter- and transdisciplinarity are

or will be institutionalised without imposing a normative account of the process. Instead, it is a flexible and adaptable response to different conditions, bringing to the fore their imprint on theory and practice.

## Conclusion

Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary institutions and organisations that foster these formats have a double identity: these institutions are increasingly legitimised as part of the academic culture at universities but also continue to struggle to implement environments for working across boundaries, thus requiring “extra” criteria to be seen as “real” institutions (Vienni-Baptista & Rojas-Castro, 2019). At a time when urgent societal problems reinforce the demands for responses at the epistemological, cultural and organisational levels, efforts to institutionalise try to diminish this identity tension by recognising the rich variety of ways of performing inter- and transdisciplinarity (Vienni-Baptista et al., 2022). Contributing to systematising institutionalising practices allows for a better understanding of the complexities that govern action and that cannot be easily quantified in local contexts. A balance between short-term initiatives and profound transformation of the higher education system will enable widespread rethinking of how to offer more inclusive and powerful pluralist answers to current societal challenges (Klein et al., 2022). For all this to occur, this framework provides administrators, researchers, educators, students and perhaps funders and policymakers with an understanding of how to successfully navigate institutionalising processes.<sup>1,2</sup>

BIANCA VIENNI-BAPTISTA

## Notes

1. This is dedicated to the memory of Prof. Em. Julie Thompson Klein.
2. The work done by Bianca Vienni-Baptista is framed within the project “Investigating interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity: Intersections of practices, culture(s) and policy in collaborative knowledge production” (INTERSECTIONS), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), Programme PRIMA, Grant no. 201582.

## References

- Apostel, L., Berger, G., Briggs, A. & Michaud, G. (Eds.) (1972). *Interdisciplinarity: problems of teaching and research in universities*. OECD.
- Darbellay, F., Sedooka, A. & Paulsen, T. (2016). *La recherche interdisciplinaire sous la loupe. Paroles de chercheurs*. Peter Lang.
- Holley, K. (2009) Understanding challenges and opportunities in higher education. *ASHE higher education report* (Vol. 35). Jossey-Bass.
- Jantsch, E. (1972). Inter- and transdisciplinary university: A systems approach to education and innovation. *Higher Education*, 1(1), 7–37.
- Klein, J. T. (2010). *Creating interdisciplinary campus cultures: A model for strength and sustainability* (1st edn.). Jossey-Bass/Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Klein J. T., Vienni-Baptista B. & Streck, D. (2022). Introduction: Institutionalizing inter- and trans-disciplinarity: International case studies. In B. Vienni-Baptista & J. T. Klein (Eds.), *Institutionalizing interdisciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity. Collaboration across cultures and communities* (pp. 1–9). Routledge.
- Vienni-Baptista, B. & Rojas-Castro, S. (2019). Transdisciplinary institutionalization in higher education: a two-level analysis. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(6), 1075–1092.
- Vienni-Baptista, B., Klein J. T. & Streck, D. (2022). Conclusion: A framework for institutionalizing inter- and trans-disciplinary research and teaching in higher education. In B. Vienni-Baptista & J. T. Klein (Eds.), *Institutionalizing interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity. Collaboration across cultures and communities* (pp. 232–248). Routledge.
- Vienni-Baptista, B., Vasen, F. & Villa Soto, J. C. (2018). Interdisciplinary centers in Latin American universities: The challenges of institutionalization. *Higher Education Policy*, 32, 461–483.
- Weingart, P. (2014). Interdisciplinarity and the new Governance of Universities. In *University Experiments in Interdisciplinarity. Obstacles and Opportunities*. <https://pub.uni-bielefeld.de/publication/2673487>.