



Integrative studies on rural landscapes: policy expectations and research practice

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Abstract

During the 1990s, integrative (interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary) approaches gained increasing importance for rural landscape studies and numbers of such projects rose. However, it is not clear, what funding agencies expect from integrative projects, how researchers make them operational and what their outputs are. To identify policy expectations and research practice, we did a literature review and conducted standardised interviews with funding agencies, researchers, and project leaders. Results revealed that funding agencies have varying understandings of interdisciplinarity. They set up interdisciplinary programs not primarily to achieve scientific progress but to solve societal and environmental problems. Regarding publication output, peer-reviewed papers are preferred before research reports. Funding agencies seldom give practical advice to projects on how to meet their demands. Researchers frame project objectives in terms of their problem solving capacity. Although perceiving lack of common operational understanding of interdisciplinarity as a problem, researchers do not arrive at a common terminology. As barriers to integration we identified the spatial distance between researchers, project meetings, and management problems. Researchers perceive a tension between the applied character of the projects and the scientific expectations placed on them. Funding-agencies' expectations are hardly known to researchers. We recommend greater dialogue between funding agencies and researchers especially regarding interdisciplinary objectives, problems and solutions. We suggest paying greater attention to the organisation and management of research to assure the necessary support for integrative research teams.

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1. Introduction

Moves towards integrative research approaches in studies on rural landscapes have led to a rapid increase in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary

studies, where researchers, managers and the public collaborate to find solutions to real landscape problems (Buchecker et al., 2003; van Asselt and Rijkens-Klomp, 2002; Haaren, 2002; Moss, 2000). Fry (2001) has shown that such partnerships place a high demand on academics to move out of their disciplinary frameworks and their academic environments and norms. Research on rural landscapes spans an ever wider range of subjects including geography (both social and physical), resource economics, ecology, planning and sociology, history, etc. In many ways, this development is providing evidence of the

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complexity of landscape and the need for integrative approaches. Both funding bodies and research environments promote integrative studies (Tress et al., 2001, 2003; Opdam et al., 2002; Wu and Hobbs, 2002; Fry, 2001; Tress and Tress, 2001; Décamps, 2000; Klijn and Vos, 2000; Turner, 2000; BMWV-KK, 1999; Höll and Nilsson, 1999; Fry and Sarlöv-Herlin, 1995; Naveh, 1995; Nassauer, 1995).

Yet, it is not always clear what researchers do and produce in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies that make them different from disciplinary research. Nor is it clear what research funding agencies are expecting of the integration process. In this paper, we examine integrative landscape studies with a focus on what is expected to result from such studies compared with disciplinary studies, and comment on the process and products of integrative landscape research. This paper identifies policy expectations and reviews research practice in large-scale integrative studies on rural landscapes across Europe. The paper arises from the INTELS project (<http://www.intels.cc>) that examines large-scale interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary landscape studies throughout Europe with the specific aims of analyzing the state-of-the-art and identifying a code of good practice.

First, we provide an analysis of funding agency expectations. We identify their motivations for and aims in promoting interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity and discuss the expected outputs. Second, we present researcher perspectives on and experiences with integrative research. Third, we discuss the problems of researchers to translate the policy expectations into research practice and what difficulties they have to cope with. Finally, we identify some management aspects that can increase the performance of integrative landscape studies and help achieve a better match with policy expectations.

2. Methods

For this paper we gathered information from a literature review, reports and descriptions of research programs, and qualitative interviews. We reviewed the literature on interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, especially theoretical and methodological papers, and those on the practical application of integra-

Table 1

Overview of thematic areas of the standardised open-ended interviews

No.	Thematic area
1	Understanding of interdisciplinarity/transdisciplinarity
2	Experiences with interdisciplinarity/transdisciplinarity
3	Project organisation
4	Integration of disciplines in the project
5	Project outputs and marketing
6	Expectations towards and evaluation of the projects
7	Personal experiences from the project

tive approaches. We collected written material from large national research programs within Europe. The projects were screened to collect statements about the expectation of funding bodies towards integrative projects and, in general, about their understanding of the approaches. We contacted five projects within five national programs and conducted 19 interviews. These were standardised open-ended interviews as described by Patton (2002). Interviewees were selected to represent a variety of different landscape projects from different research programs and to include researchers, project leaders, Ph.D. students, and representatives of funding bodies. The projects were all studies on rural landscapes. According to their own project descriptions and the researchers, all projects were either interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary.

From the literature review and the project descriptions we had defined seven thematic areas (see Table 1), which are of importance to funding bodies and research practice. The interviews were structured in relation to these areas. Questions were kept open and interviewees encouraged to add whatever information seemed relevant to them.

Interviews lasted between one and three hours, were taped and fully transcribed. Transcripts were given an identifier, referring to the research project or funding body respectively, the interviewed person and the number of the question in the transcript. Depending whether the interview was held with a project participant or a representative from a funding body the identifier starts either with P or F (e.g. PA-1-1 and FA-1-1). The second character refers to the project. As participants were guaranteed anonymity only identifiers appear in the text. A manual content analysis and cross over analysis of the transcripts was performed to get

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