

## INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN THE HUMANITIES AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR APPLIED ETHICS

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**Abstract:** At present, there is a renewed interest in interdisciplinarity in connection with the new mission of the humanities. It is related to their longer-term adaptation to new scientific challenges and social trends. Also, in Slovakia, there is a strong call for a more active activation of the humanities to interdisciplinary cooperation and participation in social change. It is necessary to overcome these barriers and their relative closure. The paper discusses the basic attributes of interdisciplinarity, its application possibilities and social significance. Interdisciplinary approach and its correct understanding can become a constructive tool in the humanities, in the creation of integrated research projects, for their acceptance in practice. The innovative force of applied ethics is related to the availability of competence in interdisciplinarity.

**Keywords:** Applied Ethics, study program, interdisciplinary skills.

Today's new mission of the humanities causes a renewed interest in interdisciplinarity. Challenges for greater activation of the humanities towards interdisciplinary cooperation and participation in social change are becoming increasingly strong also in Slovakia. Adaptation of the humanities to these new scientific challenges and current social trends is not a short-term issue. At the same time, both international initiatives and national challenges are necessarily appealing or calling for the practice – oriented humanities<sup>1</sup>. These trends indicate that the humanities are required to reconsider their current mission and priorities for the future – a stronger link with practice, better employability of graduates, searching for closer and coordinated efforts of the humanities in solving societal problems, implementation of joint study programs, focusing more specifically on research projects and adaption of relevant training methods. This strategy should strengthen the development of the academic humanities at universities and their international status as well as their social credibility. These challenges are not only a verbal expression of national policies in relation to the innovative role of the humanities, but they are also a requirement for humanity-oriented scientists to adapt new

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<sup>1</sup> This is also illustrated by initiatives developed by the EFPE (European Law and Education Forum), the Polish Humanities Forum, Learning Slovakia – the National Education and Training Development Program, as well as other challenges of our ministry to support interdisciplinary studies.

methods and approaches to this role. Therefore, we can also welcome the strategic challenge of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic from April 2018<sup>2</sup>, which initiated introducing a new type of study program - interdisciplinary studies as a new study organizational form in order to create a unique study profile. In accordance with this Amendment to the Act, Slovak universities can also introduce interdisciplinary studies. Within the scope of this study program, a student has the possibility to choose from a wider range of subjects from several study fields. Depending on the specific curriculum, the student eventually acquires education in a particular field of study or in a combination of two study disciplines.

The candidates do not have to choose a particular study program at the beginning of the of the university study, but they can do so later, after learning the deeper context. Nowadays, the state of scientific knowledge depends on a lot of new knowledge formed in the breakthrough frameworks of disciplines. Generating much knowledge within one theoretical discipline becomes the past. Interdisciplinary studies therefore support acquiring much knowledge that goes beyond boundaries of individual scientific disciplines. The latest EU's research initiatives also spell out projects aimed at addressing the real world problems rather than the progress of individual scientific disciplines. A student, who chooses this type of study, is expected to be more flexible and involved in several disciplines. He will not be narrowly profiled in just one field, and moreover, he will not flinch even in the others. He can choose a certain combination of disciplines and after finishing the bachelor study he may be profiled in one of those disciplines, which was part of his interdisciplinary basis. Although the issue of interdisciplinary programs already has its own history<sup>3</sup>, today interdisciplinarity related to the humanities is more pronounced in in the frame of its specific application possibilities and relevant didactic practices.

## **Interdisciplinary dimensions of and competencies**

Development in this area has shown that interdisciplinary activity also requires disciplinary competence. Emphasis is placed primarily on methodological unity and theoretical consistency, i.e. more than on system integrity as a complex synthesis. Interdisciplinarity, in its developed

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<sup>2</sup> Government bill amending Act no. 131/2002 Coll. on Higher Education Institutions and on the Change and Amendments to Certain Acts presented on the 20th April 2018 and approved by the National Council on the 19th June 2018, <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=zakony/cpt&ZakZborID=13&CisObdobia=7&ID=951>, 24.07.2018.

<sup>3</sup> The term „interdisciplinarity“ entered the scientific discourse relatively late, around the 1960s. Based on the study model in Princeton, the newly established university Bielefeld formed The Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) in 1966. This step was not only remarkable in the terms of the scientific approach, but it was also well-founded. The establishment of the center was not only a formal or organizational act, but it was also a social experiment and result of scientific effort that required outgassing results and strategies from the broader views than monodisciplinary ones.

form, does not need only contextual but also conceptual synthesis and subsequent theoretical reconstruction. In scientific projects or in education it is often presented as a simple disciplinary and organizational interaction or interoperation. Where should we also look for the main problem related to interdisciplinarity? All the today's, challenges to it are oriented rather to scientific research, not to university teaching, the preparation of specific knowledge and competence. Moreover, the interdisciplinary modules in education are much more implemented on the polydisciplinary base or as complexly presented modules of disciplines or subjects without a more pronounced methodological and epistemic unity. Today it is evident that interdisciplinarity as a specific research creates added value involved in knowledge. We have to realize that all, what each discipline can say about a specific problem area, can be expanded, modified, relativized or even refined through other disciplines. Interdisciplinarity, therefore, leads to the widening of the scientific horizon which cannot be realized otherwise. It allows us to tackle the problem in a whole new light and societal horizon.

Although particular expertise is needed, it is, by no means, a sufficient condition for interdisciplinary cooperation. Interdisciplinarity is more than an organizational form of scientific preparation and research, because its solution is primarily a person-centered competence with the assumption that dialogue and methodological guidance can successfully overcome individual disciplinary boundaries. Therefore, interdisciplinarity requires expanding scientific capacity beyond its own expertise. That is a kind of skill that requires training and practice and is not implemented simply by meeting people of different disciplines. For this reason, any debate on interdisciplinarity remains non-committal unless certain concrete steps are taken to support interdisciplinary dimension, a new type of cooperation, and a new form to reflect the problem. Obtaining this competence leads through specialized training, interested and open relationships with other disciplines, where the priority theme becomes a common scientific interest and willingness to solve the issue. Both a multi-faceted and a comprehensive approach are more a starting point than a full interdisciplinary activity to solve the problem. Therefore, it requires the application of methodological integrity and new theoretical maturity in the form of conceptual clarity, analytical sequence, common ways of obtaining and evaluating data, professional acceptance of methods and scientific objectives used, as well as acceptance of application procedures.

According to some authors "There is no generally accepted and unambiguous determination of what can be considered interdisciplinary research, the ideas of interdisciplinarity are more or less intuitive" (Velký Sociologický Slovník, 1996, p. 443). We can find some answers in the discussions of methodologists' initiatives in the 70s and later of system theorists. G. Berger defined what disciplinary, interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary research is. The term interdisciplinarity is "simply understood as the interaction between two or among more disciplines, ranging from a simple exchange of views to the integration of methodologies, concepts, procedures and terminology" (Velký Sociologický Slovník, 1996, p. 444). Problems of interdisciplinarity examined today are mainly related to the organization of science, the

management of large-scale scientific research programs and the preparation of scientific cadres for interdisciplinary research programs. If we say, that interdisciplinary research exists, then it should also correspond to the training of specialists, study programs, the acquisition of interdisciplinary experience and competence. Relatively new matter in the study of interdisciplinarity is the orientation towards interdisciplinarity as a value. Nevertheless, we are still unable to determine clearly what can be considered as interdisciplinary research. One of the typical interpretations of interdisciplinarity is found in the view of the sociologist R. König ([https://encyklopedie.soc.cas.cz/...](https://encyklopedie.soc.cas.cz/)). His definition is not derived from the general characteristic of interdisciplinarity, but from distinguishing two principally different types of interdisciplinary research – "soft" and "hard". The soft type is characterized by the traditional classification of scientific disciplines divided into two groups by function – auxiliary and generalizing disciplines (history, in relation to auxiliary disciplines including paleography, chronology, diplomacy etc., belongs to generalizing ones). König does not associate the hard type with the hierarchical classification of disciplines, but with the understanding the object of investigation as sums of aspects, while each of them is examined by relevant scientific discipline.

However, in the age of globalization, it is important to supplement interdisciplinary competence with intercultural one and, on the practical level, also with understanding of institutional conditions due to the application of interdisciplinary approaches. After analysis of the interdisciplinarity issue we can make a list of following considered basic interdisciplinary competencies:

- Interdisciplinary openness and the premise for transdisciplinary approaches.
- Disposition for logical argumentation, methodical and analytical skills.
- Basic and indicative knowledge from current science and scientific work.
- Orientation of thinking and co-ordination efforts towards problems and their solution.
- Social, personality, communication skills.
- Ethical and intercultural competencies.
- Ability to act independently.
- Practical orientation and institutional applicability.

Interdisciplinarity can only be discussed in an interdisciplinary way. Participants from disciplinary fields are expected to have the ability to depersonalize from the original particular scientific discipline. The minimum requirements for gaining such competences should be involved in study programs and modules. That is the matter of lecturing and organizational activities, too. The very question of preparing interdisciplinary training programs requires specific research and a certain amount of time for personal preparation, obtaining economic support, and setting up cooperation from practice. Verification of models, their alignment with social strategies and institutional support has a real chance of success. On the other hand, the ad hoc solution could be meaningful and devalue such models.

## **Ethics, science and interdisciplinarity**

When determining the relationship between ethics and science (in the context of interdisciplinarity), we must firstly ask the question whether ethics can be regarded as science. This question is essentially answered in the negative. Ethics is not science among sciences. Ethics is a normative discipline where science has, among other things, normative limits. In science and research, however, the number of ethical issues and problems has been increasing in accordance with the increasing number and severity of risks that have new forms of manifestations and moral nature.

Ethics in science is interdisciplinary in its own. This has led to a number of specific ethical issues, ranging from ethics related to life science (bioethics) and medical ethics, through legal ethics, environmental ethics, business ethics to media ethics, and ethics of sports. We often feel the ambition of traditional disciplines to push ethics into its periphery or the willingness to intensify cooperation and mutual acceptance or enrichment. Because of this diversification of ethics into more sub-disciplinary areas, there is a significant risk for more intense interdisciplinary cooperation. This fact weakens the possibility of mediating recognized ethical justifications and positions, key concepts and the most important theories. Applied ethics cannot be understood as closed or narrowly interdisciplinary discourses but as discourses open and broadly connected to various scientific and practical areas. This is also a special intellectual and application strategy. In this context, it legitimately enforces a new methodological paradigm – broad coherence introducing a methodological ambition to seek balance in the multidisciplinary, theoretical level as well as between theory and practice, a descriptive and normative aspect in ethics.

Considering that the distinctive feature of contemporary research is the higher degree of socio-practical orientation of science, its inter (trans)-disciplinarity, we must deal with this issue as soon as possible. It is a fact that the model of disciplinary organized science, ethical particularism, has dominated so far. The need for a new orientation in social sciences is highlighted in the 1990s by I. Wallerstein in a well-known Bulbenkian Commission Report on the Restructuration of Social Sciences: "We move from a social past of full contradictory certainties, whether related to management, ethics or social systems, to the present characterized by serious questions including the issue of internal security options. We are probably witnessing the end of a certain rationality that is no longer eligible for our time. The emphasis we call for is emphasizing the complexity, the timing, the instability that now corresponds to the transdisciplinary movement coming to power... We call on the social sciences to open up these questions (Wallerstein, 1998, pp. 85-86).

The modern way of managed production, the ethical application strategy, is distinguished by being organized, with respect to the practical social objective, as a complex problem and it is always associated with the values and interests bound to that goal. Even the shifts from

theoretical ethics to applied ethics also raised the need for an interdisciplinary approach because of the specificities related to applied ethics. The success of the ethical application itself depends on meeting the requirements of this approach. Interdisciplinarity as well as its more advanced forms are not self-pertinent and purpose-oriented methodological requirements of the present knowledge, but become one of the most important assumptions of scientific cooperation, new styles of managing the research problem and practical handling of current dilemmas.

The very origin of applied ethics is a testimony of overcoming the autonomous status of ethics as a philosophical normative theoretical format and the necessity to solve current problems in the intentions of interdisciplinarity. One of the attributes of ethics is also to master interdisciplinarity by assuming its competence in research purposes as well as expert and scientific discourse.

Developments in applied ethics have gone through several phases. They have been influenced by different dominated approaches and conceptual directions. In the framework of the discourse on applied ethics, we can identify some of the current problems that cause many controversies, ambiguities and difficulty in their troubleshooting. As an example, we can mention the problem of the undone diversity of applied ethics, the ongoing debate on the ethical application mechanisms and the interdisciplinary issue, which is an important prerequisite for professionalism in relation to the application of ethics, the ethical experts' work and their preparation. An applied ethicist should be sufficiently available for work and dialogue at an interdisciplinary level and can address current issues with ethical position so that they are acceptable not only for theory, but also for practice (Fobelová et al., 2005, p. 55). Today, there is no doubt that linking ethics to other areas of research is useful, and moreover, this demand and trend improves scientific precision and becomes important for any scientific or professional performance. As we have already mentioned, interdisciplinarity is more about the interaction between two or more disciplines, ranging from a simple exchange of views to the integration of methodologies, concepts, procedures and terminology. If we rigorously apply ethics with an interdisciplinary intent, it means, we are going into relatively demanding theoretical work and the complex methodological procedure of specialists from individual fields whose task is to clarify the unified positions in accordance with the subject area, define the terms, the subject of the research and make its joint evaluation. In other words, we accept the new ways of interpreting research ethical characteristics and parameters or respectively, we determine precisely usable and important principles and standards, their form acquired within the application process in terms of their identification and measurability. However, there are some disciplines whose results are measurable e.g. by economic parameters, but they may not be of prime importance for ethical expertise and vice versa.

Therefore, we believe that the actual effectiveness of the application depends on the way and the thoroughness of realizing interdisciplinary strategy. The rise in the practical orientation of the research is directly related to the rise of interdisciplinary and, in recent times, mainly transdisciplinary projects. They are no longer just the subject on clarification of particular

positions and procedures but a theoretical agreement and a conjoint goal going beyond the framework of any contributing discipline. From our point of view, applied ethics has an interdisciplinary nature. Therefore, it requires a synthetic – integrative or interdisciplinary adjustment. Applied ethics has its significant methodological requirements including: e.g. the balance (internal and large-scale coherence), proportional representation of ethical rationality in relation to rationalities of other sciences, necessity of ethical assessment of the problem also from social and practical point of view, institutional mechanisms of ethical support, professionalism and expert argumentation, practical applicability, contextualism (consideration of cultural-value specifics of application), and so on.

A rational form to achieve consensus on optimization parameters in interdisciplinary research is a serious discourse. Therefore, in the frame of interdisciplinary competencies we must focus on an effort how to achieve both complete and incomplete consensus. It is necessary to deal with questions of partiality and universality in science and knowledge as well as their functioning in the epistemic community. We should shift from linear to flexible contextualism, withdraw from the consideration that innovations are not perceived as the application of scientific knowledge and technology, from the analysis of direct consequences. It should be better to focus on predicting the quality of life and social comfort. Applied ethics can thus become an important part of interdisciplinary research and application of this knowledge.

From this point of view, applied ethics is not only an expert activity but also a part of modern trends in the interdisciplinary field, an important part of the social risks elimination, a tool for social prevention, specific guidance, solutions of public and social security. In scientific interdisciplinary discourse, the mission of applied ethics lies in eliminating the moral risks and failures, making critical judge decisions, providing argumentative support for the conclusions and strategy that lead to good practice and good life.

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