

**Accreditation MTL2 2025**  
**Minutes thematic session ‘Interdisciplinarity vs. Disciplinarity’**  
18 June, 2025  
13:30-14:30, Trans 10

Participating programs: German, Celtic, Italian, Spanish and French

The discussion opened with the question of how interdisciplinarity should be defined. The program representatives agreed on a bottom-up understanding of disciplines as toolboxes (e.g., theories and methods), in line with Utrecht University’s definition. This definition does not align with the faculty’s way of defining disciplines as being the programs. Teachers considered their programs already interdisciplinary, for example by combining literature, history, media, and linguistics. A key concern was the external push from the faculty to implement interdisciplinarity through combining programs (“disciplines”), and how to maintain the quality and depth of the programs, especially regarding the language programs.

Interdisciplinarity is more common at the master’s level at both UU and in the accreditation committee’s experiences. It is difficult to implement in the Bachelor’s phase due to the need for a strong disciplinary foundation. All participants of the discussion agreed that students in their first year are not yet ready for deep interdisciplinary engagement, and instead first need a disciplinary background. Concerns were raised about the risk of diluting academic depth, especially in language programs.

The accreditation committee shared their experiences and (best) practices. In Groningen, the teaching staff is dealing with the same issues arising from budget cuts. Next year, they will start a new interdisciplinary course organized as follows: all is taught in English, and there are teaching teams of three. The first four weeks will focus on linguistics, then four on literature, and then four on media. Specific days of the week will cover certain topics, such as media or history, which can be related to the themes/disciplines of the course.

In Leuven, most interdisciplinary courses are taught at MA-level, and sometimes they are taught with teams of two, with each teacher specialized in one of the disciplines, for example literature and science. But courses like these are more problematic when they have to be taught in several languages.

In Ghent, there are no such interdisciplinary courses, but there were courses linked to literature, such as ‘Literature and Ecology’. However, they are discontinued due to organizational difficulties.

In Leiden, collaboration across programs is encouraged, for example through courses with lectures taught in Dutch or English, but seminar groups in the target language of instruction. Moreover, these courses are not called interdisciplinary. The courses are brought together to maintain the richness of the faculty, as some courses are taught in various programs, for example on the Middle Ages.

In Utrecht, some of the programs have courses that are already interdisciplinary and work well, such as the ‘Crossing Borders’ courses. Here, students bring knowledge from their various language backgrounds to discuss, for example, grammatical structures. The course is taught by two instructors from different disciplines and is well-received. In Utrecht, the BA program Politics, Philosophy and Economics is a successful example of an interdisciplinary program. There, students first gain foundational knowledge of the different disciplines in the first year and combine the knowledge starting from the second year. Similarly, the (interdisciplinary) honours track only starts in the second year, after students gained

disciplinary grounding. These programs do not deal with the issue of target language of instruction, however. This complicates the current story of combining the language programs.

A major tension exists between interdisciplinarity and preserving the language of instruction in language-specific programs. Opening up courses to students from various disciplines may require teaching in Dutch or English, reducing target language input. A possible solution could be joint lectures in Dutch/English and discipline-specific seminars in the target languages.

The faculty claims the goal of the transition to the broader structure is to create a versatile workforce, attracting students by preparing them for a complex job market and equipping them in various ways. Nevertheless, similar programs in Germany are closed as they do not attract enough students. Moreover, questions arose regarding how to distinguish our university from others, if everybody starts introducing interdisciplinary programs. Moreover, based on both students' and teachers' experiences, the accreditation committee and the program representatives agreed that there is a risk that students perceive interdisciplinary initiatives as a cost-saving measure rather than a meaningful learning opportunity. For English and Celtic at UU, students note they can tell when the instructor is teaching outside their own expertise, regardless of the instructor, disengaging them from courses. If the aim of the faculty is to keep the richness, as is the aim in Leiden, there is no need to call it interdisciplinary. The goal can be achieved by reducing the number of courses.

The accreditation committee recommends trying to think of ways to use the collaboration as a facet, aim to meet halfway, and make certain compromises: exploring ways in which such type of thinking might enrich students. However, in a non-totalizing way, only as one aspect of a curriculum.

For the new program 'Intercultural Communication and Mediation', it is harder to think of such ways, as there needs to be enough disciplinary grounding for students. It is unclear what the Intended Learning Objectives are now, making it hard for all attendees to form concrete ideas about the program. The accreditation committee recommended preserving the first semester for disciplinary grounding and introduce interdisciplinary elements later in the program. The languages could perhaps be taught later as well, but the accreditation committee was not sure this would work. Moreover, suggestions included using common themes (e.g., climate change, migration) and developing shared learning outcomes across programs by comparing EERs. The question arose whether ICC might then become a discipline in itself, and whether it would prepare for the UU's MA program intercultural communication, which is a linguistics program.

The importance of bottom-up development and program-specific flexibility was emphasized. Finally, the accreditation committee argued that the current BA programs were wonderful, and staff had to fight to let their voices be heard. The humanities should not become "the extra thing" (in courses like 'medicine and literature'), as it should not cease to exist.