

## SHORT TERM SCIENTIFIC MISSION (STSM) – SCIENTIFIC REPORT

The STSM applicant submits this report for approval to the STSM coordinator

**Action number:** TD1408  
**STSM title:** Building interdisciplinary academic careers in Europe  
**STSM start and end date:** 02/04/18 to 30/04/18  
**Grantee name:** Professor Catherine Lyall

### PURPOSE OF THE STSM/

This STSM consisted of an orientation and fact-finding visit to the offices of the League of European Research Universities (LERU) in Leuven, Belgium during week of 9 April 2018.

LERU ([www.leru.org](http://www.leru.org)) represents 23 of the research-intensive universities in Europe. The League advocates on behalf of its members through dialogue with EU institutions and other EU-related organisations and through carefully considered publications on fundamental issues affecting Europe's research universities.

This STSM enabled the researcher, Professor Catherine Lyall, to work with the directorate of the League of European Research Universities (LERU) to follow up on their report *Interdisciplinarity: how universities unlock its power to innovate* (LERU, 2016). This report considered member universities' views on interdisciplinarity and discussed their strategies for supporting such forms of research. The report also made many recommendations for universities who seek to expand their support for interdisciplinary research including, for example:

- “incorporate interdisciplinarity in governing structures, overseen by senior appointments with strong experience in interdisciplinarity;
- secure an institutional budget line which is operated in a competitive and transparent manner;
- build platforms and physical/virtual meeting places for collaborative actions;
- adjust hiring and promotion practices to value interdisciplinary expertise and skills;
- develop support from pedagogical units to provide solid interdisciplinary teaching” (see <http://www.leru.org/index.php/public/news/interdisciplinarity-how-universities-unlock-its-power-to-innovate/>)”

The underlying purpose of this STSM was to examine institutional structures and strategies in order to explore incentives and barriers to interdisciplinary academic careers. It formed a key element of a broader research project that is seeking to re-assesses how we develop the next generation of academic researchers. Through a series of career history interviews with established interdisciplinary researchers this study, supported by the University of Edinburgh, is gathering data about the status of researchers engaged in interdisciplinary research and the career challenges they face. It is identifying the steps that we as a research community must address if we are to build a new cadre of resilient researchers able to craft

their research trajectory in ways that allow them to develop a coherent profile of skills and an academic reputation so that they are better equipped to tackle the interdisciplinary research challenges posed by the modern world.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF WORK CARRIED OUT DURING THE STSM**

Some preparatory activities were completed prior to the visit to LERU. This included the Intrepid-sponsored interactive discussion on “Exploring interdisciplinary careers” that has been accepted for the International Transdisciplinarity Conference at Leuphana Universität Lüneburg in September 2017. This acted as a small pilot activity for the STSM and enabled discussions with interdisciplinary researchers about:

- the rewards and challenges of following an interdisciplinary career path
- some of the ‘mixed messages’ sent by typical reward and recognition systems (in different institutions, in different countries)
- the positive and negative factors at an institutional level, and implications for career progression strategies

The second preparatory activity involved a short discussion with Professor Frédéric Darbellay, University of Geneva, who was one of the LERU report’s authors. This took place during Professor Lyall’s participation in an interdisciplinary doctoral school at the University of Geneva in November 2017.

The third preparatory activity involved a close reading of the LERU report prior to the visit to Leuven and the preparation of a topic guide to steer the conversations during the visit.

During the visit to LERU, extended discussions took place with Dr Katrien Maes, Deputy Secretary General. These covered four broad areas in order to:

- gain an understanding of the role of LERU, its working practices and its goals in publishing position papers
- develop a deeper understanding of the process around the identification of interdisciplinarity as a suitable topic for the position paper series and to gather information about the actual production process for the report and the consultations with member universities that this entailed
- identify suitable informants from amongst the LERU membership who might offer further insight into the ways in which the research-intensive universities’ vision for interdisciplinarity impacts on career development
- discuss LERU’s current work on gender and how this might impact on interdisciplinary academic careers.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF THE MAIN RESULTS OBTAINED**

(max. 500 words)

One of the key outcomes from this STSM visit was a better understanding of the ways in which member universities contribute to LERU policy discussions and publications. In particular, the importance of the Senior Officer function within LERU universities who act as a key point of contact. As a result, we have been able to identify a feasible set of LERU members to contact and potentially visit for follow up interviews. These fall in to three geographical groupings of LERU members as follows:

- in the UK (Imperial, UCL, Oxford, Cambridge and Edinburgh)
- Germany/Switzerland (Freiburg, Geneva, Zurich)
- the Netherlands/Belgium (Leuven, Leiden, Utrecht, Amsterdam)

Data collected during this STSM will contribute to a book manuscript that Professor Lyall will be completing during 2018 (currently under contract with Palgrave Pivot with the working title *Governing Interdisciplinarity: The role of institutions in shaping academic careers*). Empirical research for this broader project will result in a series of case studies to help us understand how interdisciplinary academic research careers are built and the data gathered during the STSM will be particularly informative in addressing the roles that institutions play.

#### **FUTURE COLLABORATIONS (if applicable)**

(max.500 words)

One of Intrepid's tasks in the forward work plan is to reflect on "The Future of Academia and Universities: as if interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity mattered". There are clear complementarities between this theme and the outputs from this STSM.

One of Intrepid's objectives is to build leadership for interdisciplinarity so this STSM will help to provide a clearer route map for institutional leaders and research funders who truly want to commit to "Interdisciplinarity 2.0" in contrast to the very mixed messages that are currently received by the research community – especially Early Career Investigators – about the wisdom of pursuing an interdisciplinary career track within universities today. The data collected via this STSM will help us to understand how interdisciplinary academic research careers are built in practice and identify whether these interdisciplinary careers do actually progress differently from those that are focused on only one discipline.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Professor Lyall gratefully acknowledges the support of EU COST Action Intrepid in supporting her visit to Leuven and thanks Dr Katrien Maes, Deputy General Secretary LERU for her advice and warm welcome to LERU.