

# Transcending boundaries

International experts joined a *Nature Sustainability* forum in China last month to re-think interdisciplinary research for global sustainability.

At the heart of the sustainability scholarly discourse is interdisciplinary research, and academic institutions, funders, and publishers have now largely recognized that. More projects joining up a variety of experts are being developed and supported, but most of the well-known barriers and challenges of making interdisciplinary research remain. From having to deal with different languages and methodologies, facing longer research design and execution time, to dealing with the research breadth–depth trade-off and its challenges during peer review and publication. Although we cannot influence most of these issues, we at *Nature Sustainability* are committed to helping interdisciplinary sustainability scholars to publish their most influential work with us.

It's indeed one of our editorial priorities to attract and publish truly interdisciplinary work. We believe that in order to gain in-depth knowledge of the drivers and effects of, for example, rapid urbanization, or environmental degradation, research needs to reflect the systemic nature of the

problems and that is better achieved through interdisciplinary work. But what do we mean exactly by interdisciplinary research? Is academia well equipped to make this kind of research flourish? These are in all aspects old questions (and of course they are not limited to the sustainability domain), but to a degree they are still debated and unresolved. In the broad context of sustainability, framing the research questions through an interdisciplinary lens is exceptionally important in light of the most urgent and interrelated policy needs that are encapsulated in the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development adopted recently by the United Nations. Therefore, *Nature Sustainability's* editorial team felt that the right time to help revamp the debate was around the journal's launch. Last month, we organized an international forum, hosted by Tsinghua University in Beijing, China, bringing together a diverse group of experts from around the world to discuss the challenges of scaling up interdisciplinary research for global sustainability. The meeting brought together scholars with

very different backgrounds, including engineering, economics, oceanography and anthropology, among many others. The majority of the participants didn't know each other, but came together united by a strong interest in sustainability-relevant research and a fair bit of direct experience in developing interdisciplinary research. We observed tremendous engagement in the works of the forum, with experts bringing new perspectives grounded in their own experience. The discussions touched on the need to re-define career incentives to pursue interdisciplinary work (or even training) and therefore re-structure the institutions creating such incentives, as well as the importance of going beyond academic impact to produce societal impact. We are keen to disseminate the most relevant and agenda-setting insights from the forum through our pages over the coming months, and we invite our readers to join the debate. □

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