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Prof. Dr. Ruth Müller

Munich Center for Technology in Society (MCTS),
School of Management & School of Life Sciences, Technische Universität München

Re-Disciplining Academic Careers? Performance Metrics, Inter/Disciplinarity and Academic Career Development

Abstract

Over the last decades, actors in research policy and university governance have promoted interdisciplinarity in research and training, framing interdisciplinarity as crucial for addressing the increasingly complex problems of contemporary society and for building sustainable futures. The creation of topic-focused interdisciplinary research centers is part of this growing focus on interdisciplinarity. In this interview and observation-based study, we explore how mid-career researchers (postdocs; assistant professors) in an interdisciplinary climate science research center in Sweden experience the relationship of interdisciplinarity and academic careers. We trace tensions between the interdisciplinary ambitions of the center and its researchers, and the metric-centered career norms that permeate the university where the center is located. While researchers are generally well able to secure employment through interdisciplinary projects funded by more application-focused agencies, building a long-term career within the university is perceived to require processes of (re-)disciplining their work and abandoning a thorough interdisciplinary orientation. Articulating the implicit hierarchies between interdisciplinary and disciplinary work at the center, researchers differentiate themselves and their colleagues into “politically correct researchers”, who are funded now, but whose futures depend on the next topic-focused funding calls; and “reliable academics”, who also succeed on a disciplinary stage, i.e. by securing funding from disciplinary agencies or by publishing in disciplinary high-impact journals. Only the latter group is considered competitive for long-term university positions. Mid-career researchers hence find themselves – often after years of interdisciplinary training – at a crossroads where they feel they must decide between continued care for interdisciplinary practice and their future career options.