

The role of peak bodies in advancing transdisciplinary research

NITRO-Oceania (the Network of Leaders of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research Organisations in the Oceania region; <https://nitro-oceania.net/>) welcomes the attention paid to transdisciplinary research by the Centre for Science Futures of the International Science Council.

We propose an addition to the vision for how transdisciplinary research needs to be supported, which builds on our own work and ambitions. This is the development of peak bodies to advocate for transdisciplinary research in research policy and funding fora – nationally and internationally. Of course, we support the multiple forms of bottom-up action that are occurring, but powerful champions are also needed. Indeed we note the role of the International Science Council as such a champion.

Peak bodies are needed at national, regional and international levels. As well as advocating for transdisciplinary research in the fora that only they have access to, peak bodies play an important role in fostering discussion of the kind initiated by the Centre for Science Futures.

We note three important challenges that are not covered in the Kaiser and Gluckman discussion paper. One is how we get from the current situation to the vision of support for transdisciplinary research that the authors advocate. We suggest that the development of peak bodies and their active engagement in the transition is critical.

Second is recognising the importance of political context in transdisciplinary research, especially in what researchers can and cannot control. In particular, researchers cannot mandate co-creative processes – these need to be willingly entered into by all parties. Attention needs to be paid to distortions that occur when powerful stakeholders are unwilling to participate or participate in bad faith in order to protect their interests. Attention also needs to be paid to decolonising co-creative processes and to ensuring that stakeholder fatigue and disillusionment are minimised. These are challenging issues for researchers to address and for funders and research policy makers to effectively deal with. The attention of powerful champions in peak bodies is essential to recognising and progressing effective ways of managing these and other challenging aspects of transdisciplinary research.

Third is to consider and implement the additional targeted support required by early career researchers focusing on transdisciplinary investigations. Clear career pathways for such researchers have yet to be established and, again, peak bodies have a role – in partnership with early career researchers – in fostering appropriate action in this area.

NITRO-Oceania stands ready to help in advancing the important discussions raised by this report.

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