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interdisciplinary research

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Central Queensland University, interdisciplinarity, interdisciplinary research, Macquarie University, Manna Institute, University of New England

February.16.2026

As universities are slashed, this is what we need more than ever

By Marg Rogers, Margaret Sims, Anwaar Ul-Haq and Einar Thorsteinsson

As Australian universities face ongoing [budget pressures](#), [staff cuts](#), and [governance issues](#), interdisciplinary research and research translation become increasingly difficult for researchers. Despite this, the need for interdisciplinary research is stronger than ever due to the increasing complexity facing our society. Our research project brought together a team of researchers from education, psychology, machine vision technology, communication, sociology, and those with lived and living experience to co-create a personalised program app for service families.

Children from first responder, Defence and veteran (service) families face common complex challenges that [reduce their ability to thrive](#) in education settings and their personal lives. Our interdisciplinary team co-created a web-based solution to improve access to free, personalised support programs for these children.

Research background

We found [61% of parents](#) did not feel confident to support their children through the stresses of service family life. These include [frequent relocations](#) (often every 18m-2yrs), [parents working away](#) on deployment and training episodes, fears for the [safety of their parents](#), unique challenges when their [parents leave the service](#), and parents who are exposed to injuries and trauma.

These injuries can be [physical](#), [mental](#) and/or [moral](#), impacting all aspects of family life. The trauma can transfer to the other parent or partner and their children. The children often go undiagnosed, as they move through different schools and communities quickly. Often, their behaviours are [misdiagnosed](#) in school as ADHD (boys) and BPD (girls) rather than a [trauma response](#).

Despite this, being part of a service family has many benefits and [protective factors](#) (systems that support families). These include pride in their parent's work, a strong sense of community service, economic stability, opportunities to live in and experience different communities and educational settings, and being part of a close-knit service community.

In response to the challenges these families faced, we co-created free, research-based resources to support these children and better equip their educators, support workers and parents. These [online resources](#) are in the form of [e-storybooks](#), [interactives](#) and [modules](#).

Our research project

After trialling the resources, we received very positive feedback. Most feedback helped us improve the resources. Some feedback, however, such as the site's usability, was deemed too difficult for us to achieve as academics. This included the request to create an app that produced free, personalised programs.

Educators told us that although they wanted to use the resources, they often found it too time-consuming to find which resources to use when a particular child or children needed additional support. Educators said they were time-poor and that parents also needed resources that were quick and easy to find.

Once our team became part of an interdisciplinary mental health institute ([Manna Institute](#)), we met with other researchers who were able to offer a solution to this feedback. By discussing the challenges we faced in our projects with those from different disciplines, new potential solutions were found.

Time-consuming

This was a time-consuming process, because each team member (Table 1) had their own methods of working and their own knowledge and skills that coloured their approaches. Sometimes, we had to explain why a particular approach could not be used with a particular cohort, and then new solutions were suggested.

<i>Discipline(s) of different team member</i>	<i>Role</i>
<i>Early childhood; military family researcher</i>	<i>Coordination of the co-design process with stakeholders; ensuring the design used language that was assessible and logical to families</i>
<i>Machine Vision Technologist</i>	<i>Knowledge holder; creating and designing the initial idea; liaison with the full stack developer (technician); explanations to the team about what was possible</i>
<i>Communication; military family sociologist; lived experience</i>	<i>Feedback about the categories, codes and language used in the co-design</i>
<i>Psychology; education PhD student</i>	<i>Administration; feedback, designing the second version of the personalised programs</i>
<i>Education consultant; lived experience</i>	<i>Feedback about the categories, codes and language used in the co-design</i>
<i>Support worker; lived experience</i>	<i>Feedback about the categories, codes and language used in the co-design</i>
<i>Full stack developer</i>	<i>Design; coding; communicating to the team the limitations and possibilities of the solution</i>

Table 1: Team members' disciplines (Source: [Rogers et al., 2024](#))

Eventually, a draft version of the [personalised program](#) was made and tested with those in the target cohort. These programs have made the end-user experience easier by using an online survey and partner feedback. Also, it means educators, parents and support workers can create new programs as the children's needs change.

Benefits and challenges of interdisciplinary approaches

Interdisciplinary approaches provide both benefits and challenges. The Australian Research Council calls for researchers to work in interdisciplinary teams to solve complex world problems. However, while interdisciplinary approaches provide better solutions, they come with challenges in higher education institutions, which we discuss in [our paper](#). These are summarised in Figure 1.

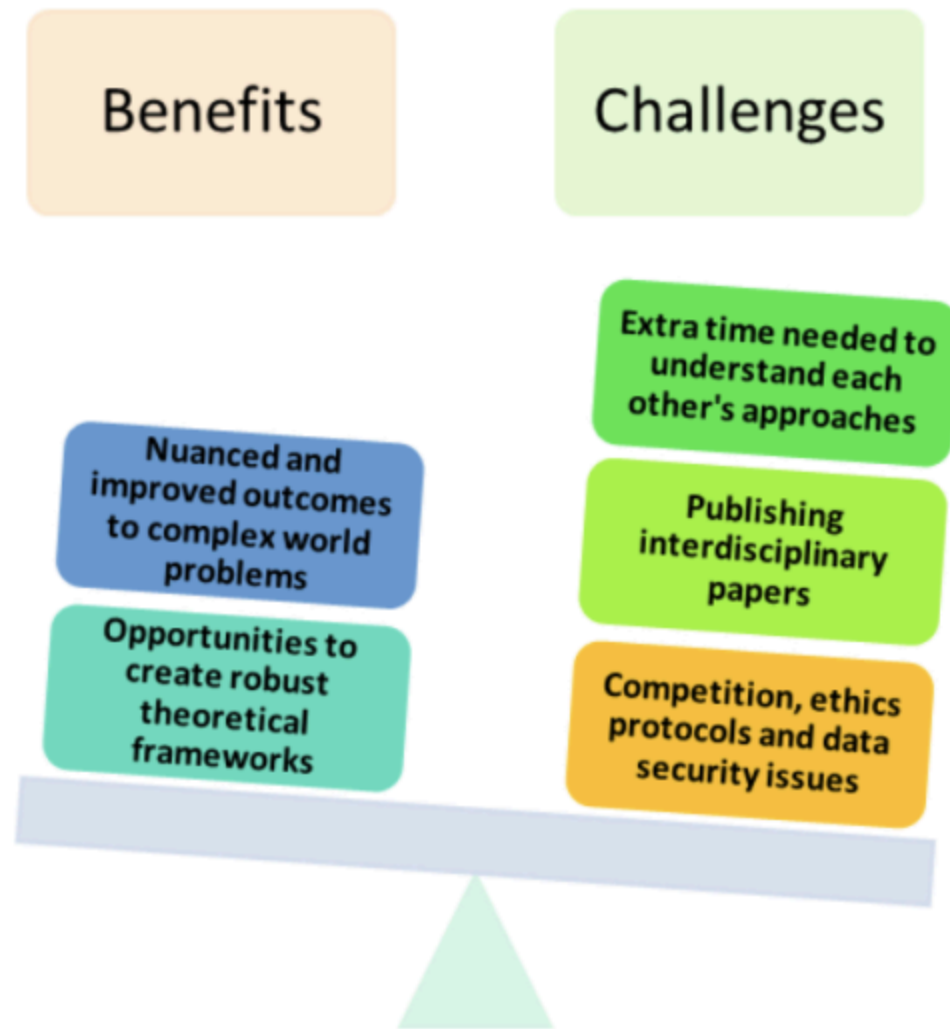


Figure 1: Benefits and challenges of interdisciplinary research

Extra time

Apart from the extra time needed for this type of research, publishing this type of work is problematic. Reviewers are often from within one discipline and can reject papers based on their

narrow understanding of what research looks like in their field. Additionally, competition between faculties can mean pressure to publish in certain disciplines.

Ethics protocols and data security issues can pose challenges, especially as these can differ across faculties. Additionally, different academic calendars across an institution or multiple institutions add to the complexities of solving these challenges.

Unless these challenges are addressed within higher educational institutions, researchers will be reluctant to engage in interdisciplinary research, reducing their chances of addressing complex world problems. It is time for action from our research leaders and publishers to make interdisciplinary research a priority and a supported space as society faces complex issues that need addressing.

In a beleaguered university sector, this may seem like a low priority, but when universities solve real-world problems, their relevance and benefit for our society are on display. This can help bolster the argument for well-funded universities.



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