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Global Institutional Best Practices in Interdisciplinary Research

Current Practices across Six Regions
Global Higher Education Interdisciplinary Network (GHEIN)



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Executive Summary

This brief showcases current best practice in global interdisciplinary research across the Global Higher Education Interdisciplinary Network (GHEIN). It draws on GHEIN's first two Regional Chapter meetings (April–June 2026) and 17 semi-structured interviews with members across six regions, including City University of Hong Kong, King Saud University, Tecnológico de Monterrey and the University of Aberdeen. The examples presented are an illustrative snapshot of regional practice rather than a comprehensive account.

Common ground

Across all six regions, members report similar enablers: visible leadership endorsement, conditional or seed funding that rewards cross-disciplinary collaboration, cross-departmental faculty appointments, and shared physical infrastructure. Common challenges also occur: how interdisciplinary work is perceived by disciplinary colleagues, how it is funded, what facilities support it, and how governance and evaluation processes recognise it.



Regional headlines



Priorities diverge in emphasis, shaped by each region's funding systems, scale and resourcing context.

North American members, building on long-established cross-cutting structures, gave most of their attention to how interdisciplinary work is recognised in promotion and how its long-term impact is assessed, against a backdrop of volatile federal research funding; translation and commercialisation remain strengths across the region.

Structures have been crucial, encouraging interdisciplinary working through the very ways that campuses, buildings, and research institutes operate. Translational research and real-world impact were a particularly prominent theme in the Asia-Pacific discussions, across a highly diverse set of institutional contexts. The Middle East & North Africa group is focused on structured capacity-building — through training, new courses and promotion criteria — to embed interdisciplinary working from an early career stage. Sub-Saharan African institutions are oriented around developing-world challenges, alongside funding diversification and the commercialisation of research outputs. In Latin America & the Caribbean, a challenge-led approach dominates, with institutions organising around real-world missions rather than starting from disciplinary integration. European members, operating some of the most mature interdisciplinary ecosystems in the network, have moved beyond establishing the case for interdisciplinary work and are instead focused on overcoming the structural barriers that limit it.

No single model

Taken together, these findings suggest there is no single best model for interdisciplinary research: successful practice is shaped by the funding, governance and resourcing context of each institution. What is consistent is the direction of travel — towards dedicated cross-cutting structures, funding that rewards collaboration, and a growing recognition that promotion and evaluation frameworks must catch up with how interdisciplinary research is actually practised.

Table 1: Summary of headline priorities by region

Region	Headline priority	Illustrative institutions
North America	Sustaining cross-cutting university structures; recognising interdisciplinary work in promotion; assessing long-term impact (translation and commercialisation also well established)	Georgia Tech, MIT, Northwestern, Duke, Purdue
Asia-Pacific	Translational research and real-world impact, across highly diverse institutional contexts	CityUHK, RMIT, Deakin, NTU, Manipal academy of Higher Education
Middle East & North Africa	Structured capacity-building: training, courses, promotion criteria	King Saud University, An-Najah National University, Delta University of Science & Technology
Sub-Saharan Africa	Developing-world challenges; funding diversification; commercialisation	Covenant University, Stellenbosch University
Latin America & Caribbean	Challenge-led, mission-driven collaboration	University of São Paulo, UF Viçosa, Tecnológico de Monterrey
Europe	Overcoming structural barriers (funding, assessment, incentives) via dedicated institutes	Aberdeen, Konstanz, TUM, Politecnico di Milano, Turin, Liverpool, Groningen

Introduction

The purpose of this brief is to externally showcase the best current practices in global interdisciplinary research, as told by members of the Global Higher Education Interdisciplinary Network (GHEIN). This brief intends to culminate these practices so that current members can harness the expertise of their peers and external practitioners can adopt new approaches as they seek to improve their own interdisciplinary research strategies. It also identifies the structural barriers hindering interdisciplinary research and by exposing these, acts as a foundation on which stronger capacity can be built.

This brief is the second output of the GHEIN to date, aiming to consolidate member inputs to consider how expertise and resource can be pooled and best practice shared for maximum impact. A subsequent brief will consider how the current wave of artificial intelligence (AI) may augment these learnings.



The evidence base for this brief is taken from the first two Regional Chapter meetings held between April and June 2026 in which members exchanged insights on the current interdisciplinary landscape within their universities. This has been supplemented by 17 semi-structured one-to-one interviews with members across the six regional groups. Each interview prompted discussion on effective institutional strategies for interdisciplinary research, partnership working, social and economic impact, current priorities, and needs from the GHEIN.

This brief finds that the challenges faced by individual institutions are often common across the global group – characterised by perceptions of interdisciplinary research, funding, facilities, and governance processes. However, the practices that have been most successful do vary and are shaped by available funding systems, scale of research activities, and the resourcing context. There is perhaps no single best model to be adopted.

The priorities emphasised across the regions are similarly varied, reflecting what each chapter chose to focus on in discussion rather than the full range of what its members value. For North America, sustaining structures that overcome siloed working and assessing the long-term impact of interdisciplinary research were central, with translation and commercialisation already well established. In the Asia-Pacific region, translational research and the realisation of real-world impact is equally crucial. The Middle East & North Africa group places an emphasis on structured capacity-building for interdisciplinary research via training, new courses, and promotion criteria. For Sub-Saharan Africa, it is the addressing of developing world challenges that forms a common priority, alongside funding diversification and the commercialisation of research outputs. Over in Latin America & the Caribbean, a challenge-led approach is commonly adopted, resulting in mission-led delivery of interdisciplinary outcomes. In Europe, the provision of dedicated institutes, specialised labs and research centres has been a key priority, providing structures that support collaboration across disciplines.

This brief draws upon key GHEIN meeting and follow-up interview insights, showcasing the practices of universities including City University of Hong Kong, King Saud University, Tecnológico de Monterrey, and the University of Aberdeen, to name a few. It offers an indicative snapshot of current practices, but stops short of being a fully comprehensive account.

Table 2: Summary of recurring barriers and enablers by region

Region	Key barrier	Key enabler
North America	Promotion and tenure assessed against traditional disciplinary norms	Integrated promotion review; cluster hiring
Asia-Pacific	Career disadvantage from slower-building interdisciplinary track records	Impact credited in promotion (RMIT); institute-level review (Manipal Academy of Higher Education)
Middle East & North Africa	Faculty mindsets protective of discipline and resources; constrained internal funding	Senior leadership signalling; formal interdisciplinary policy
Sub-Saharan Africa	Funding sustainability (typically 3–5 year cycles); reliance on global-north funding	Alignment to national/continental strategy (e.g. Africa 2063, SDGs)
Latin America & Caribbean	Fragmented governance; limited cross-institution collaboration	Challenge-led mission platforms; postgraduate networks
Europe	Disciplinary assessment frameworks (e.g. the UK's Research Excellence Framework)	Dedicated institutes (e.g. Aberdeen); culture-based approaches (e.g. TUM, Politecnico di Milano)

1. North America

This section draws on the North America regional chapter meetings, interviews conducted with Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech), MIT and Northwestern, and case studies of Duke University and Purdue University developed for the Interdisciplinary Science Rankings report.

The North American chapter is made up of research-intensive universities, mostly in the United States alongside some Canadian members, and interdisciplinary research here rests on more established structures compared to most other regions. Interdisciplinary research is mature, and members are interested in how its long-term impact is evaluated. The chapter identified two challenges as its distinctive focus: how interdisciplinary work is recognised in promotion, and how its impact is assessed. A shared external pressure, the volatility of federal research funding, runs through the discussion.

Structures for crossing disciplines

The institutions share a common and long-standing model: university-wide institutes and labs that sit outside departments, while faculty keep a departmental tenure home. Georgia Tech operates eleven Interdisciplinary Research Institutes organised around "grand challenges" such as robotics, energy and manufacturing. All new buildings on campus are cross-disciplinary rather than being assigned to specific departments, forming research neighbourhoods of four to eight departments each. MIT has more than two dozen interdepartmental laboratories alongside a set of presidential initiatives in areas including generative AI, quantum and manufacturing, with 16% of new faculty hires in 2026 appointed across multiple departments. Northwestern has around 25 University Research Institutes and Centres, funded and administered centrally, and Duke and Purdue each run a comparable set of university-wide institutes.

Several institutions treat this model as decades-old strategy rather than recent innovation. Purdue, for example, embedded interdisciplinary centres into its budget and governance more than twenty years ago. In each case the cross-cutting structure is well established and built into how the university operates, and members emphasised that interdisciplinary work builds on strong disciplinary foundations rather than replacing them.

This sentiment also ran through the discussions of the regional chapter meetings. At Princeton University, joint institutes are also an established mechanism for interdisciplinary research, particularly enabled by the smaller size of the institution compared to regional peers. Rather than having an academic Dean model, departments are governed by Chairs who report directly into leadership. As such, siloes are avoided and department Chairs regularly communicate, which supports the cross-pollination of ideas. At the University of British Colombia in Canada, interdisciplinary research clusters are formed, with up to 25 live at any one time. However, measuring impact can be a challenge – as can being able to differentiate whether grants would have still been awarded if groups were working in single disciplines instead.

Summarising the group discussion, it was suggested that there are two structural mechanisms for accelerating interdisciplinary work. One is to build a defined structure which prompts interdisciplinary behaviours (such as institutes and research groups) and another is to remove the structures that enable siloed approaches – usually as a result of legacy governance. This could include the removal of single discipline buildings.

Funding and incentives

Institutions combine recurring internal budgets with external and philanthropic funding to support interdisciplinary research. Georgia Tech provides its institutes with a university-funded base budget, and Purdue funds its centres through a dedicated budget line held by its research office. MIT draws around 40% of its research funding from non-federal sources and matches sponsored research on campus roughly one-to-one with its own resources, giving it flexible internal funding that includes the seed and start-up support new interdisciplinary initiatives draw on. Seed funding is a common lever: Duke's Bass Connections programme provides team grants that members report have generated many times their value in subsequent external funding. Interdisciplinary research clusters at the University of British Colombia are awarded funds of around $200,000 over a 1-2 year span.

Georgia Tech has also successfully incentivised interdisciplinary working by establishing an office dedicated to supporting faculty with complex $10mn+ proposals. Such proposals are interdisciplinary by nature, typically involving over twelve Principal Investigators and ten or more university and industry partners. With this support in place, faculty have an increased desire to develop these types of proposal and now have a higher success rate in doing so. This success rate has doubled across the past six years, the period in which the office has been operating.

For others, promotion practices have been a great incentive. At MIT, all faculty promotions are viewed by the whole leadership team, which naturally builds a connectivity across disciplines in the way that researchers are credited.

The main concern was exposure to shifts in federal funding, on which several institutions depend heavily, and the resulting interest in more stable, growth-oriented streams and protected support for doctoral and postdoctoral training. Philanthropy can also be harder to secure for interdisciplinary work, as donors often remain loyal to the department they graduated from, though this poses more of a minor challenge at times.

Translation and impact

Commercialisation is well developed across the chapter, running through dedicated structures such as Georgia Tech's corporate partnership and startup programmes, Northwestern's ventures organisation, and MIT's record of spin-outs. Members pointed to interdisciplinary research reaching real-world application, from neonatal sensing technology and cancer imaging to community programmes addressing gun violence and agricultural research that has informed national climate policy.

Barriers and how institutions are responding

The most consistently raised barrier was promotion and tenure. Junior faculty are often recruited from interdisciplinary settings and then assessed against traditional disciplinary norms. Members were clear this is an ecosystem-level problem that no single institution can resolve. Some are adjusting how they evaluate: Georgia Tech uses a single integrated promotion review for jointly appointed faculty and assesses its institutes annually across five dimensions, with a deeper five-yearly review; MIT escalates promotion cases to senior leadership beyond the department. Cluster hiring is also used to build interdisciplinary capacity quickly, though members noted it can create tension over shared funding: Duke has hired dozens of faculty this way and is now exploring endowed interdisciplinary chairs to stabilise joint appointments. Evaluation practice is well-

developed, though members noted that assessing interdisciplinary impact fairly, in a way that credits breadth without penalising it, remains unresolved.

2. Asia-Pacific

The Asia-Pacific chapter covers a more diverse group of countries than any other in the network, including Australia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Singapore and Taiwan. Member institutions vary in scale, resource levels, funding environment and disciplinary composition. The practices described below reflect that variation.

This section draws on the regional chapter meetings, interviews conducted with City University of Hong Kong (CityUHK), Deakin University, RMIT University and Manipal Academy of Higher Education, and a case study of Nanyang Technological University (NTU) developed for the Interdisciplinary Science Rankings report.

Structures for crossing disciplines

Some of the approaches taken by member institutions are set out below. CityUHK, in Hong Kong, operates seven research institutes as horizontal structures that cut across its college hierarchy, organised around five priority areas including One Health, digital society, smart cities, materials science and brain research. Institute membership is open by call, with annual seed funding and international convening attached.

Similarly, in Australia, RMIT University has a well-established cross-cutting structure: its eight Enabling Impact Platforms, in place for over a decade, are university-wide vehicles drawing affiliates from across schools and colleges around challenge areas such as sustainable technologies, biomedical and health innovation, and social change. Deakin University takes a similar approach at an earlier stage, holding a set of cross-faculty initiatives centrally rather than within faculties, supported by dedicated research and seed funding, currently including an Institute for Applied Artificial Intelligence and a new humanitarian research programme that draws staff from across the university.

NTU, in Singapore, has taken a more appointment-led route. It centrally holds some faculty positions and allocates them to schools that propose strong interdisciplinary initiatives, with new hires often co-affiliated across schools so that disciplinary expertise is brought directly into cross-cutting work. Every school is required to draft an interdisciplinary strategy, and the university reallocates physical space to interdisciplinary centres as projects evolve. Structurally, NTU is also rethinking the way faculty members are hired and promoted. At time of writing, NTU has implemented a new Impact-Based Assessment Framework (IBAF) which replaces the traditional, metric-led evaluation with a narrative-centred assessment built around a Research Statement. Individual schools also operate a faculty search committee with cross-appointments from different schools and colleges to allow for more interdisciplinary thinking. Institutionally, there is an emphasis that interdisciplinary work should build on strong disciplinary foundations rather than replace them.

Manipal Academy of Higher Education, in India, has established research verticals within each of its 31 institutes, covering functions from doctoral research to grants, ethics and intellectual property. Each vertical is linked to its counterparts in other institutes, so that a team in the medical school works alongside its equivalent in technology.

Funding and incentives

Alongside these structures, institutional funding is used to encourage researchers to work across disciplines. Manipal allocates a share of its operational budget to an intramural research fund supporting seed grants, inter-institute grants and doctoral scholarships. Deakin released funding to its four faculties on the condition that it be spent on work crossing faculty boundaries, applying the same condition to scholarships and fellowships. RMIT runs a graduated pipeline within its platforms, from small activity grants to larger translation grants, translation fellowships and a Vice-Chancellor's scheme recruiting researchers onto topics designed to require interdisciplinary work.

In several systems, external and federal funding structures actively enable interdisciplinary work, though their design differs across the chapter. Hong Kong's Areas of Excellence and Theme-Based Research schemes direct substantial funding towards government-identified problems, and CityUHK aligns its priorities with national five-year plan themes. In Singapore, the National Research Foundation favours interdisciplinary teams in competitive calls such as AI for Science, and operates a corporate laboratory model supported by government matching funds. Australian members reported that national funders support and look favourably on interdisciplinary work but integration into scheme design is inconsistent with some funders not requiring it at all.

Translation and impact

Translating research into real-world application is a strong priority across the chapter, pursued through a mix of institutional mechanisms. CityUHK funds students and staff to turn university research and patents into start-ups through a dedicated commercialisation programme. Manipal keeps only a small equity share in spin-outs, leaving most of the value with the researchers who created them, and covers patent costs centrally to lower the barrier to commercialising their work. Deakin partners with industry and government on large-scale translational programmes, including a major recycling and clean energy initiative. NTU runs on-campus corporate laboratories with industry partners such as Rolls-Royce and Continental, bringing engineering, AI and social sciences together on problems defined by industry.

Barriers and how institutions are responding

The most consistently raised barrier was the career disadvantage facing interdisciplinary researchers, whose track records take longer to build and whose work is less readily recognised in conventional assessment. Entrenched faculty and disciplinary structures were also seen to work against cross-cutting collaboration.

Institutions are beginning to respond through how they evaluate and reward research. RMIT has embedded an impact component in its promotion process, so that societal contribution is credited alongside publications and citations. NTU utilises a similar framework but takes it a step further by equalising the weightage of output type, so that policy outputs hold the same credit as translational research. Manipal reviews the performance of its institutes quarterly, assessing not only publication quality but also translation into guidelines, practice and policy. Approaches of this kind remain uneven across the chapter, and the ability to demonstrate whether they work is generally less developed than the willingness to adopt them.

3. Middle East & North Africa

The MENA regional group is characterised by great diversity in resource capacity, resulting in some institutions being highly-funded and others feeling financially constrained. This diversity extends to industry access, with some members reporting the development of extensive relationships with the private sector and others struggling to make productive connections. It is the structured building of interdisciplinary capacity that is common to all – now taking place through training programmes, new academic courses, and student involvement.

Structures for crossing disciplines

Three mechanisms for the building of interdisciplinary capacity were reported by members. Student involvement has been one approach. For King Saud University in Saudi Arabia, this has allowed the university community to view interdisciplinary working through a new lens. Under faculty supervision, the university has founded a student club dedicated to interdisciplinary projects that support the Kingdom's Saudi Vision 2030. Students have been encouraged to consider cross-disciplinary problem-solving from an early stage in their academic journeys and have since presented their ideas to government representatives, who have responded with enthusiasm. The university specifically builds interdisciplinary capacity in its development of joint postgraduate programmes, involving multiple different colleges and research institutes. The MSc Applied Nanoscience and Nanotechnology course is interdisciplinary-by-design – including the Colleges of Science, Engineering, and Pharmacy, with student projects conducted at the King Abdullah Institute for Nanotechnology. The MSc Renewable Energy similarly combines delivery from the Colleges of Engineering, Food and Agricultural Sciences, and Science. Cross-disciplinary collaboration is formalised through this approach, demonstrating an institutional commitment to interdisciplinary working.

Incentivisation is another approach. At An-Najah National University in Palestine, an annual prize is available for interdisciplinary research in each faculty, with an award of USD 5,000 for the winning researcher. Both An-Najah National University and Delta University for Science and Technology in Egypt also encourage interdisciplinary working through tenure and promotion criteria. For the former, a researcher must have published work with co-authors from other disciplines according to SciVal data and for the latter, interdisciplinary working is an expectation in addition to government-mandated promotion criteria. Applied Science Private University in Jordan also embeds cross-departmental collaboration through its promotion framework, but seeks to curate an interdisciplinary ecosystem which incentivises and sustains faculty work. Beyond promotion criteria, this includes the provision of funding, a dedicated committee, liaison officers and performance evaluation for those participating in interdisciplinary activities.

Structured training programmes have also been crucial. At Delta University for Science and Technology, faculty have participated in the Interdisciplinary Research Impact programme, delivered by two highly experienced interdisciplinary experts. The course teaches critical skills in developing a research proposal with multiple authors and disciplines represented and is part of a portfolio of courses on interdisciplinary project design, project evaluation, publishing results, and applying for funding.

Facilities, governance and partnerships

A common enabler across the group has been the provision of dedicated facilities for interdisciplinary working. Delta University for Science and Technology provides Central Research Units which bring separate domains across the university together with advanced equipment at the cutting edge of scientific discovery. These include the Nanomedicine Research Unit and the Microbiology and Biotechnology Research Unit – bringing together medics, engineers, and computer scientists. The same is true of An-Najah National University, with central laboratories including a Cancer Research Centre bringing together biochemists and clinicians.

Governance mechanisms have also been transformative. At King Saud University, positive signalling from senior leaders about the critical value of interdisciplinary working has had a huge impact on individual researcher approaches and priorities. At Delta University for Science and Technology, a formal Policy on Interdisciplinary Science gives researchers clear direction on expectations and behaviours and seeks to break down academic silos.

Partnerships have also accelerated interdisciplinary capacity. An-Najah National University has significant partnerships with government entities, grounded in policy development relating to national issues such as energy and water security. The Consultative Center for Integrated Studies at Delta University for Science and Technology provides consultation for industry and the private sector as well as government, via the engineering disciplines.

At King Saud University, a MoU signed with food giant Nestle has brought together experts in nutrition, biochemistry, and the humanities in product analysis projects. Aligned to industry, commercialisation is also a key objective in the university's interdisciplinary activities. The Entrepreneurship Institute, Innovation Center, Technology Transfer Office, and Riyadh Valley Company all exemplify a commitment to the transfer of interdisciplinary research into the development of intellectual property and commercial opportunities or marketable products. A key example is found in the development of a multifunctional oral device for use in the treatment of head and neck cancers. This combined the work of researchers from radiation oncology, oral medicine, and dental technology – resulting in a patented device for use in radiotherapy treatment, while protecting oral tissues.

Beyond industry, the university has also established a partnership with the Max Planck Institute for Quantum Optics in Germany – resulting in published interdisciplinary research combining advanced laser research, nanotechnology, quantum technologies, energy and electronics.

Barriers and transferable insight

Despite great progress in capacity-building, barriers still persist. For some, faculty mindsets are a challenge. Researchers sometimes display reluctance to work outside of their own discipline or seek to protect their departmental resources from other fields – largely due to their own training being grounded in the single-disciplinary approach. Funding limitations can also hinder interdisciplinary projects. For some, internal funding opportunities are generally low and competitive and others have been impacted by current regional conflicts forcing government expenditure priorities elsewhere.

From the region, many lessons can be learned. Conversations between universities from different countries with similar natural resources have sparked the question – could these universities develop new interdisciplinary projects in a previously unexplored partnership? GHEIN could be a key facilitator of these connections across regions. Successful partnerships

with industry also demonstrate the power of extending interdisciplinary working into the transdisciplinary approach – acknowledging stakeholders and beneficiaries in the private sector and local communities.

4. Sub-Saharan Africa

There is also great diversity amongst this region's membership – which ranges from highly-resourced and research-intensive institutions to those with fewer resources and lower access to funding opportunities. Members report a reliance on funding from the global north, industry or philanthropic sources, with less funding available internally or via local governments. Developing world challenges form common research priorities across the group.

Structures for crossing disciplines

There are two core practices that have facilitated stronger interdisciplinary research to date. Organising interdisciplinary research into themes or clusters has allowed institutions to focus on priority areas, rather than attempts to coordinate ad-hoc projects. At Covenant University in Nigeria, clusters such as Business, Energy and Politics or Communication and Computing are interdisciplinary-by-design, and build connections across disciplines as inherent to their core agendas. A similar approach is taken by Stellenbosch University in South Africa, which identifies five strategic areas for inter- and transdisciplinary research as part of its Research for Impact agenda. These include Smart Systems and Digital Futures (combining data science, machine learning and technology) and Health and Human Resilience (combining public health, genomics, and the social dimensions of disease).

Both encapsulate an approach which can also be considered a key mechanism advancing interdisciplinary research: the focus on core expertise, rather than seeking to involve all disciplines. Bringing key assets together, and identifying connections across these areas, has allowed both institutions to channel funding, time and efforts into areas that are likely to produce impactful returns on research.

Strategic alignment and funding

Across the group, a key enabler has been the strategic alignment of interdisciplinary projects. At Stellenbosch University, the five strategic research areas are mapped onto the Africa 2063 goals, an agenda developed by the African Union which seeks to transform the continent into a global superpower over the next forty years. This, alongside mapping onto the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, has generated more visibility for the goals as well as signalling that this interdisciplinary research will have significant social and economic impacts. Demonstrating social value has been key.

Elsewhere at Covenant University, outputs are instead aligned to the university's vision, which poses seven strategic goals to be achieved by 2030. Under the 'Research Excellence' goal, product-based research is a priority – and the commercialisation potential of interdisciplinary outputs are to be the focus.

External funding has also been a significant facilitator. For some, this has been critical in navigating the perception that interdisciplinary takes resource away from single disciplines. Instead, the receipt of funding demonstrates that it can bring additional value. For others, philanthropic funding from foundations and individual grants has given universities resource for interdisciplinary projects that they would not otherwise have had access to.

The development of strategic partnerships has also supported this endeavour. For Stellenbosch University, working with partners who have a role in, or the ability to, influence policy

development is crucial to ensuring interdisciplinary research has social value. Including industry partners is also a primary goal – the School for Data Science is regularly funded by national banks bringing not only financial resources to projects, but closing the gap between interdisciplinary projects and real-world application.

Barriers and transferrable insight

Whilst the prevalence of interdisciplinary projects is testament to the region's success, common challenges are still faced. Funding sustainability can be an obstacle. Most funds are only committed for three to five years, after which a project must find additional resource or risk closure. For some, funding comes from organisations and institutions in the global north, so funding diversification and localisation is also a priority – ensuring projects are established in local contexts and poised for local implementation. Negative perceptions around interdisciplinary research – that it takes resource away from single disciplines or requires additional time and workloads for faculty – also persist. When it comes to commercialisation, there is also often a mismatch with industry lifecycles – whilst corporations work towards a short timeline (product development and research implementation), university timelines are often lengthier (research degrees and project durations).

Despite these obstacles, global universities can take many lessons from the region. Firstly, the alignment to local and national visions can anchor interdisciplinary projects to a wider objective, enhancing visibility, understanding, and potential resource opportunities. Secondly, the focus on developing world challenges could be a significant point of collaboration across the regions, for those facing similar social and economic issues. Finally, members in this region place significant emphasis on the importance of impact and proven success for different stakeholders – central to delivering projects with social and economic benefits.

5. Latin America & the Caribbean

Across Latin America, interdisciplinary research is increasingly viewed as a mechanism for addressing complex societal challenges. Regional discussions highlighted common challenges including funding constraints, fragmented institutional structures and limited international connectivity. However, members also identified significant opportunities arising from the region's unique environmental assets, societal needs and growing emphasis on innovation and impact.

A defining characteristic of the regional approach is the tendency to organise collaboration around real-world challenges such as sustainability, climate resilience, health, education and economic development. Rather than starting with disciplinary integration, institutions frequently begin with a shared problem and then bring together expertise from multiple fields to address it. This challenge-led approach helps ensure that interdisciplinary activity remains relevant to societal and regional priorities and may help with buy-in institutionally.

Structures for crossing disciplines

The strongest examples emerging from the region demonstrate the importance of creating dedicated structures that operate beyond traditional faculty boundaries.

At the University of São Paulo, interdisciplinary centres such as CCARBON provide a model for bringing together research, innovation and dissemination around a shared mission. Rather than being housed within a single academic unit, these centres create institution-wide platforms for addressing complex challenges while strengthening engagement with industry, policymakers and society.

A different model is evident at Universidade Federal de Viçosa. Through discussions with Raul Guedes, postgraduate education emerged as a critical mechanism for sustaining interdisciplinary collaboration. Graduate programmes, doctoral networks and scholarship structures help establish long-term relationships between institutions and researchers, creating continuity that is often more resilient than short-term project funding. This approach positions postgraduate education as a key piece of interdisciplinary infrastructure.

At Tecnológico de Monterrey, dedicated institutes organise interdisciplinary activity around strategic challenges. The Institute for the Future of Education, for example, combines interdisciplinary research, innovation, entrepreneurship, outreach and stakeholder engagement within a single organisational framework. Its purpose is not only to generate knowledge, but also to connect research with implementation, technology transfer and external collaboration.

This connection between interdisciplinary research and its application is also central to the Institutional Technology and Innovation Centers (CTs) at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG) in Brazil. The centres bring together intellectual capital and infrastructure within UFMG’s technological fields; their mission is to conduct interdisciplinary research, technological development, and innovation activities aimed at transferring the results to society.

Collectively, these examples suggest that successful interdisciplinary initiatives require the alignment of three complementary functions: academic research, external partnerships and innovation or

knowledge transfer. Regional participants repeatedly highlighted the need for these functions to operate together rather than as separate institutional silos.

Enablers and barriers

Funding remains both a challenge and a catalyst for interdisciplinary activity. Limited public investment has encouraged institutions to pursue partnerships with industry, government and international collaborators, while also placing greater emphasis on demonstrating societal impact. Universities increasingly recognise that interdisciplinary structures can provide a stronger platform for attracting external funding and addressing complex challenges than individual disciplines working independently.

At the same time, participants identified several barriers, including fragmented governance structures, administrative complexity and limited collaboration across institutions and countries. Members also emphasised that effective interdisciplinarity depends not only on formal structures, but on trust, relationships and shared purpose. Building collaborative cultures was seen as equally important as establishing centres, institutes or governance frameworks.

Key regional insight

The Latin American experience suggests that interdisciplinary success is less dependent on scale or resource intensity than on strategic focus. Across the region, institutions are developing mission-led platforms that connect research, partnerships and innovation around challenges that matter to society. From São Paulo’s challenge-focused centres to Viçosa's postgraduate networks and Tec de Monterrey's dedicated institutes, the common theme is the creation of structures that translate knowledge into societal impact. The region's distinctive contribution to interdisciplinary practice is therefore its emphasis on focused, problem-driven collaboration that seeks to maximise the impact of often limited resources.

6. Europe

This section draws on the two regional chapter meetings and several interviews, alongside case studies of the Technical University of Munich (TUM), Politecnico di Milano and the University of Turin developed for the Interdisciplinary Science Rankings report.

Regional context

Europe possesses some of the most mature interdisciplinary research ecosystems globally. Participants consistently described institutions that have moved beyond pilot initiatives and are instead embedding interdisciplinarity into university strategy, governance and research structures. Dedicated institutes, challenge-led research centres and university-wide collaboration frameworks are increasingly common across the region.

Unlike some regions where interdisciplinary research is still emerging, discussion focused less on establishing the value of interdisciplinarity and more on overcoming structural barriers that limit its effectiveness. These included funding systems, disciplinary silos, assessment frameworks and incentive structures.

Structures for crossing disciplines

A defining characteristic of the European approach is the creation of dedicated institutional structures that facilitate collaboration across disciplinary boundaries.

At the University of Aberdeen, interdisciplinarity is organised through five challenge areas: energy transition; environment and biodiversity; data and AI; health, nutrition and wellbeing; and social inclusion and cultural diversity. These are supported by dedicated leadership, administrative support and research fellows. The institute model creates a permanent mechanism for linking research, education and external engagement. At the University of Konstanz, collaboration is organised through objective-centred research profile areas and collaborative research centres that bring together researchers around shared questions rather than disciplinary boundaries, with funding mechanisms operating at multiple scales from seed funding to major collaborative programmes. Similar approaches were highlighted by the University of Liverpool, where a Sustainability Research Centre convenes researchers around the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and by the University of Groningen, where Schools of Science and Society connect research activity to wider societal challenges.

Others place less weight on formal structure than on culture. TUM fosters interdisciplinarity through autonomy and flexible mechanisms rather than mandates, funding bottom-up cross-school teams through its Innovation Networks, selected from around fifty proposals, and rewarding collaboration explicitly in tenure and promotion. Politecnico di Milano pairs a top-down institutional strategy with bottom-up initiatives from researchers, deliberately hiring from the humanities and social sciences into its STEM departments and awarding twenty interdisciplinary fellowships each year, supported by cross-department doctoral supervision and co-teaching.

Funding and capacity building

Funding was consistently identified as one of the most important enablers of interdisciplinary activity. While many institutions have developed internal funding schemes, challenges remain within external funding systems where interdisciplinary proposals often struggle to fit traditional review structures.

A notable strength of the region is its emphasis on capacity building. Universities increasingly seek to develop interdisciplinary mindsets from an early stage, embedding collaboration within undergraduate programmes, doctoral training and early-career development. Konstanz's Zukunftskolleg creates environments where early career researchers can come together from different disciplines to work alongside one another and develop shared understanding. The university strongly advocates the development of an interdisciplinary culture early on, seeing this as its mission to promote and nurture the interdisciplinary mindset. Aberdeen similarly highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary fellows, doctoral cohorts and institution-wide networks. Interdisciplinary doctoral training is a particular strength in Italy: Politecnico di Milano's MEDTEC School, run jointly with Humanitas University, combines medicine and engineering with students supervised across both institutions and working in a clinical setting.

Physical space and industry partnership

Members increasingly described physical infrastructure as an enabler in its own right, marking a shift from merely constructing facilities to deliberately designing spaces that enable interaction. TUM's industry-on-campus strategy co-locates partners such as Siemens and SAP, whose AI specialists work alongside university researchers, while Politecnico di Milano's Joint Research Platforms include a Smart Eyewear Lab with EssilorLuxottica that brings together more than a hundred researchers across design, electronics and materials, and has since generated a joint master's programme. The University of Turin's "Butterfly Area" campus hosts more than 300 firms alongside students and researchers in agri-food, biotech and sustainability, embodying a company-on-campus model designed to accommodate 10,000 students, 1,000 researchers and 20 spin-offs. This is complemented by the LABA food technology lab developed with government and industry.

Barriers and emerging challenges

Despite significant progress, barriers persist across the region. Disciplinary cultures continue to shape careers, publication pathways and funding assessment, creating incentives for researchers to return to familiar disciplinary environments. Funding evaluation processes were repeatedly identified as a challenge, with reviewers often lacking the expertise required to assess interdisciplinary proposals effectively. Stronger mechanisms for evaluating interdisciplinary research remain a critical gap across Europe, and in the UK specifically, the influence of the Research Excellence Framework was highlighted, as discipline-based assessment structures can unintentionally discourage interdisciplinary outputs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The practices set out in this brief show a network at different stages of maturity, but facing a common underlying question: how can universities structure, fund and evaluate research that crosses disciplinary boundaries? The recommendations below are grouped by audience, drawing on what members identified as the most effective levers and the most persistent barriers.

For university leaders and senior management



- Establish or strengthen university-wide structures — institutes, centres or platforms — that sit alongside departmental homes rather than replacing them, following models such as Georgia Tech's Interdisciplinary Research Institutes, CityUHK's horizontal institutes, or Stellenbosch's strategic research areas.
- Reform promotion and tenure criteria to explicitly credit interdisciplinary contribution — for example through integrated review panels for jointly appointed faculty, or by escalating promotion cases to senior leadership beyond the department.
- Use conditional and seed funding as a lever for new activity: funding tied to cross-faculty collaboration can catalyse change without large new budgets, and has generated returns well beyond its initial value in several institutions.
- Invest in shared physical infrastructure and co-location, which members increasingly see as an enabler in its own right rather than simply a byproduct of successful collaboration.

For research funders and policymakers



- Build review capacity and processes that can fairly assess interdisciplinary proposals, addressing the recurring concern that reviewers often lack the expertise or remit to do so.
- Offer longer funding horizons for interdisciplinary programmes: most funding is committed for only three to five years, creating sustainability risk just as programmes start to prove their value.
- Signal support for interdisciplinary teams explicitly in call design, rather than leaving institutions to infer that it is welcome.

For GHEIN

- Build a shared evidence base on what works: members were more willing to adopt new evaluation practices than they were able to demonstrate their effect, and a network-level view could close this gap over time.
- Broker connections between institutions in different regions with shared characteristics — comparable natural resource bases, funding contexts or stages of development — as members in the Middle East & North Africa chapter suggested.
- Continue to convene regional chapter meetings and follow-up interviews as the evidence base for future briefs.

Looking ahead

GHEIN's next brief will consider how artificial intelligence can accelerate interdisciplinary science, and the ethics, governance structures and infrastructure this will require. The network will continue to develop the regional chapter model as a mechanism for peer exchange, with the aim of turning the willingness to experiment described in this brief into a stronger, shared evidence base for the practices that are most effective.