

Expanding the Reach and Impact of Interdisciplinary Learning at Manchester

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Why interdisciplinary learning matters: Preparing students for a complex, interconnected world



Humanity faces several 'wicked problems'— complex, ill-defined challenges with no single solution, no clear stopping rule and competing stakeholder perspectives (Rittel & Webber, 1973)



Interdisciplinary learning cultivates 21st century skills: systems thinking, holistic understanding, and adaptive communication (QAA, 2022)



Employers want graduates who apply specialist knowledge to real-world complexity, through collaboration in diverse teams (Higher Education Academy, 2015; ICEF Monitor, 2016)

Interdisciplinary Education: A Sector Shift

“Given the transformative effect of interdisciplinary programmes on students and wider society, the trend towards interdisciplinarity will undoubtedly continue and eventually become imbedded within the strategic plans of all British HEIs”
(Evis, 2021)

In the UK - rise of liberal arts programmes, SDG-aligned curricula & challenge-based learning pathways (e.g. Leeds, Keele, Warwick, UCL, Edinburgh, LIS)

Internationally – bold interdisciplinary curricula models from Netherlands, East Asia and Australia, often in partnership with employers or communities

Reflecting and advancing Manchester's strategic direction



Values-led and socially responsible



Of Manchester and for the world



Equity, diversity and inclusion: 'you belong here'



Outstanding teaching and research

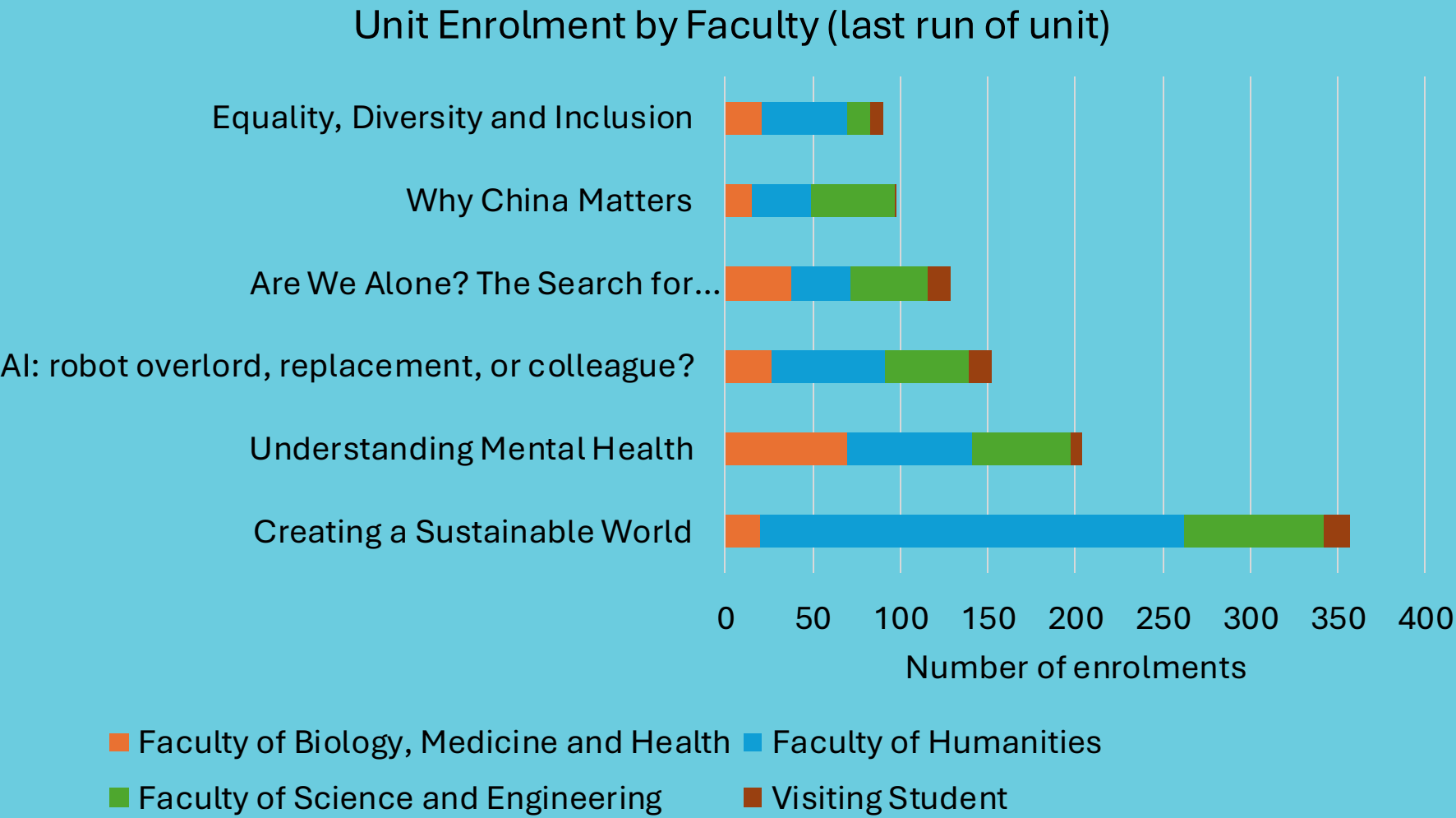


Organised for success



Opening the door to transdisciplinary approaches

UCIL: A diverse interdisciplinary learning offer



11.4% of UG cohort opted to take a UCIL unit in 2024/25

In the past decade...

14,682 students have taken UCIL units

- 65% - 1 UCIL unit
- 24% - 2 UCIL units
- 11% - 3 or more UCIL units

N.B. programmes set restrictions on no. of optional units

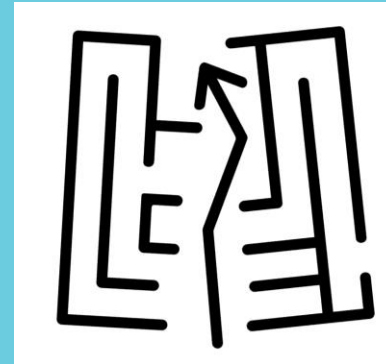
Who takes UCIL units?



Female +6%
Male -7%
Other -3%



UK -3%
EU +19%
OS +3%



Not WP +3%
WP -6%
WP+ -14%



White -2%
Black +5%
Asian 0%
Mixed ethnicity +11%
Other ethnicity +11%
Not disclosed -3%

All $p < .001$; Chi² tests.

Green = pronounced increase in UCIL participation (standardised residual ≥ 2)

Red = pronounced decrease in UCIL participation (standardised residual ≤ -2)

White = no pronounced difference (standardised residual between -2 and $+2$)

2015 – 2025; relative to UoM UG cohort on programmes ≥ 33 mos; excluding Medicine and Dentistry

Parity in academic outcomes

**UG students taking at least
one UCIL unit
65.53% GPA**

**UG students taking no
UCIL units
65.79% GPA***

**UCIL units
Mean grade = 64.95**

**Non-UCIL units
Mean grade = 64.94**

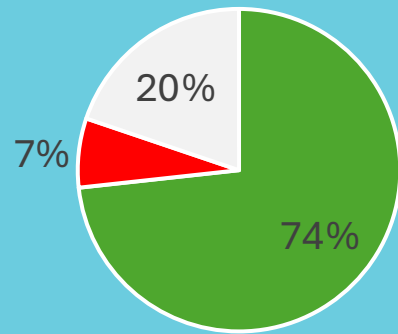
* $p = .003$; Independent t -test; Cohen's $d \approx 0.03$ (very small effect size)
2015 – 2025; incl. graduates achieving GPA > 11%; relative to UoM UG cohort on programmes ≥ 33 mos; excluding Medicine and Dentistry

Who thrives?

| Group | UCIL Unit Mean | UG Unit Mean | Difference |
|--------------------------|----------------|--------------|------------|
| Overall | 64.95 | 64.94 | 0.01 |
| Female | 65.87 | 64.97 | ▲ 0.90 |
| Male | 63.50 | 64.90 | ▼ -1.40 |
| Home | 66.17 | 65.35 | ▲ 0.82 |
| EU | 63.68 | 67.08 | ▼ -3.40 |
| Overseas | 62.62 | 64.04 | ▼ -1.42 |
| Mature | 61.21 | 62.53 | ▼ -1.32 |
| WP | 65.50 | 63.83 | ▲ 1.67 |
| WP+ | 63.46 | 62.45 | ▲ 1.01 |
| White | 66.35 | 66.29 | 0.06 |
| Asian | 63.01 | 63.81 | ▼ -0.80 |
| Black | 63.11 | 61.56 | ▲ 1.55 |
| Other ethnic backgrounds | 64.39 | 65.06 | ▼ -0.67 |

What do UCIL learners say?

Studying outside main degree

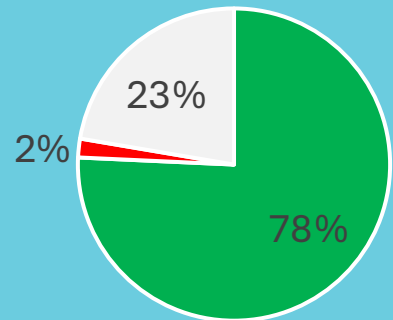


“Everything I had to do was completely out of my comfort zone”

“It’s been great to share a class with people from different degrees”

“I started to view the same question from different perspectives”

Value of interdisciplinary learning



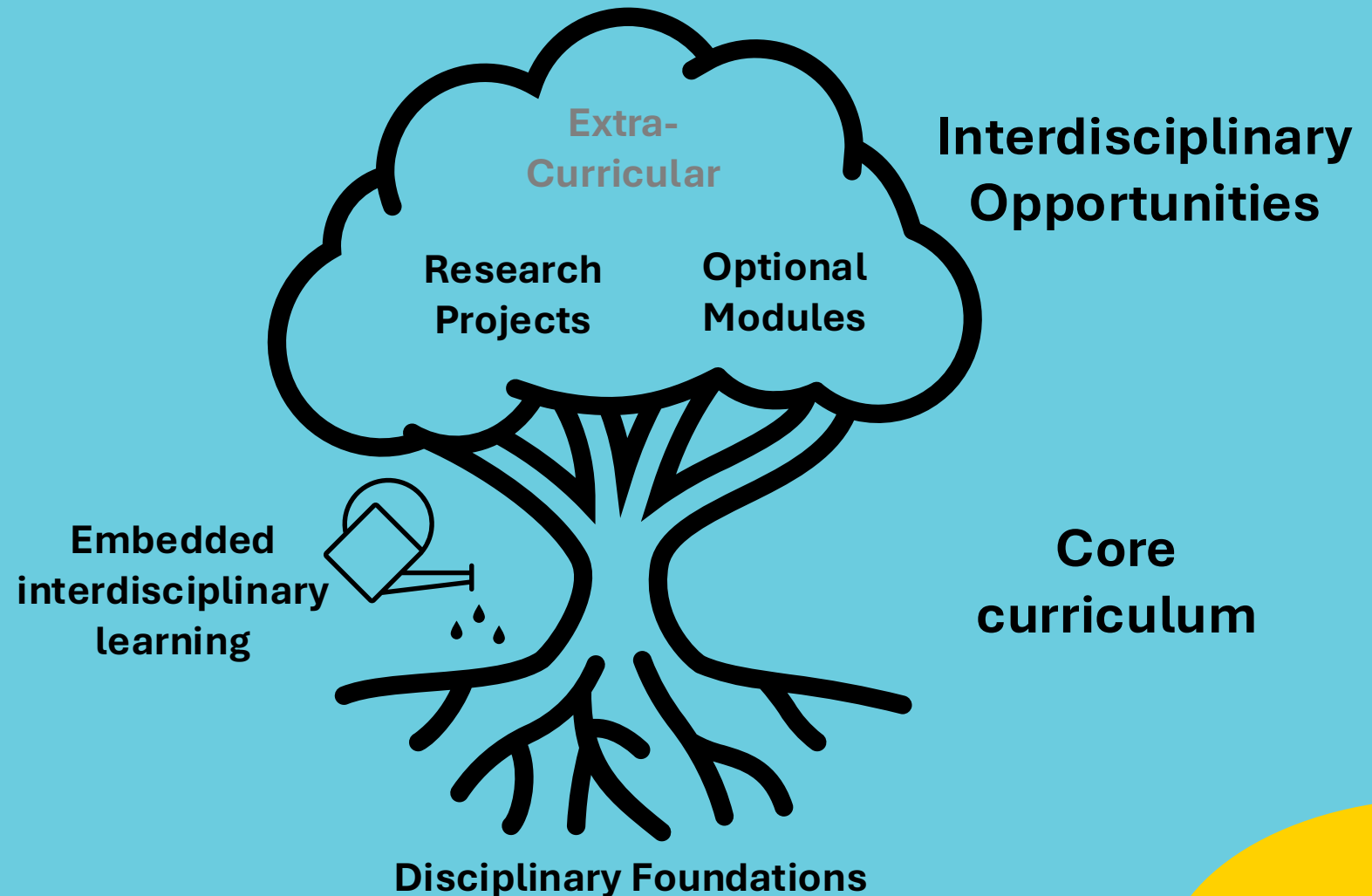
“It allowed me to learn simply for the joy of understanding”

“It has helped me to look at the world in an entirely different way”

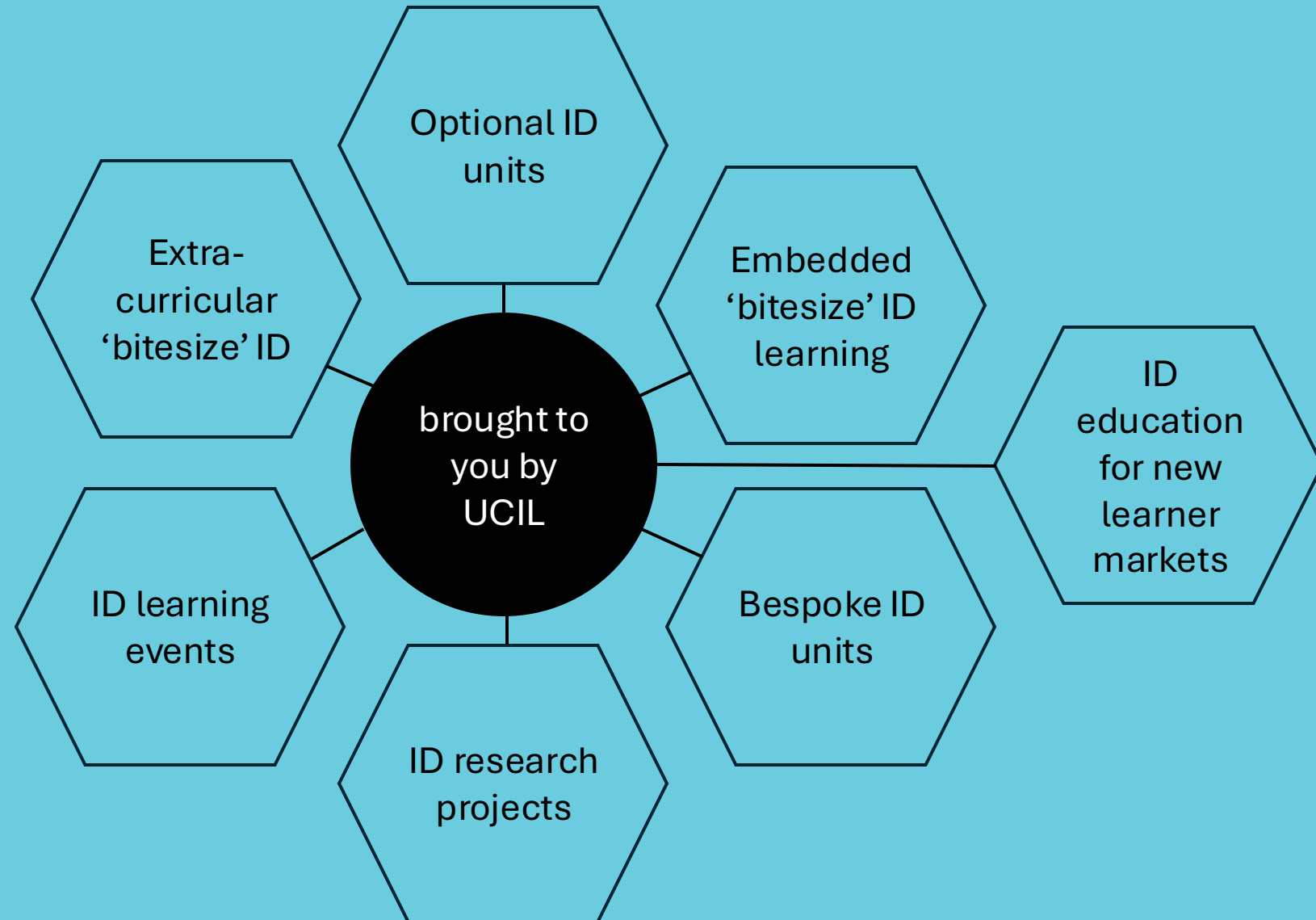
From optional add-on to core educational thread

Interdisciplinary learning should:

- Be embedded across the student journey
- Enrich and connect core disciplinary curricula
- Empower learner autonomy and exploration
- Stand as a hallmark of a Manchester education



Expanding reach, deepening impact: Interdisciplinary learning at scale



UCIL as a strategic enabler of interdisciplinary education



Design and delivery by
team

Collaborative model integrating academic and professional expertise in curriculum design and delivery



Flexible-first

Expertise in online and blended learning - enabling scale, inclusion and accessibility



Interdisciplinary
pedagogy

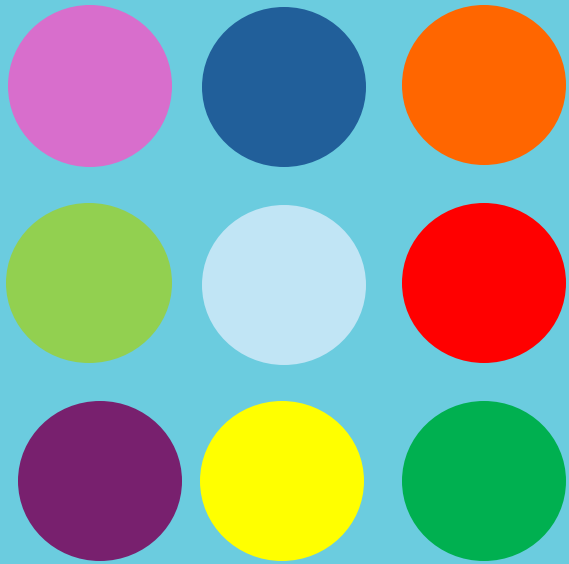
Specialists in designing active, accessible learning that bridges disciplines



Support for research-
informed teaching

UCIL provides design capacity - enabling time-pressured academics to deliver outstanding interdisciplinary education

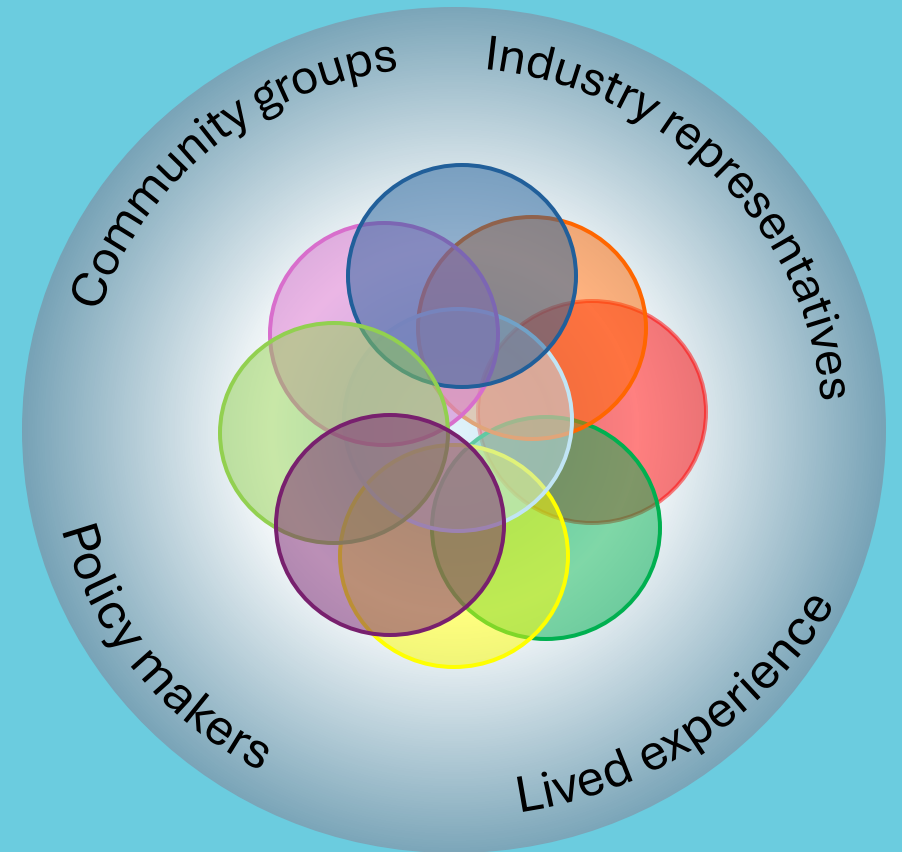
From disciplinary, to interdisciplinary, to transdisciplinary



Disciplinary



Interdisciplinary



Transdisciplinary

Interdisciplinary learning and Manchester: The next chapter

linked to
research

flexible

responsive

embedded

scalable

community
partnered

co-created

strategic

inclusive

