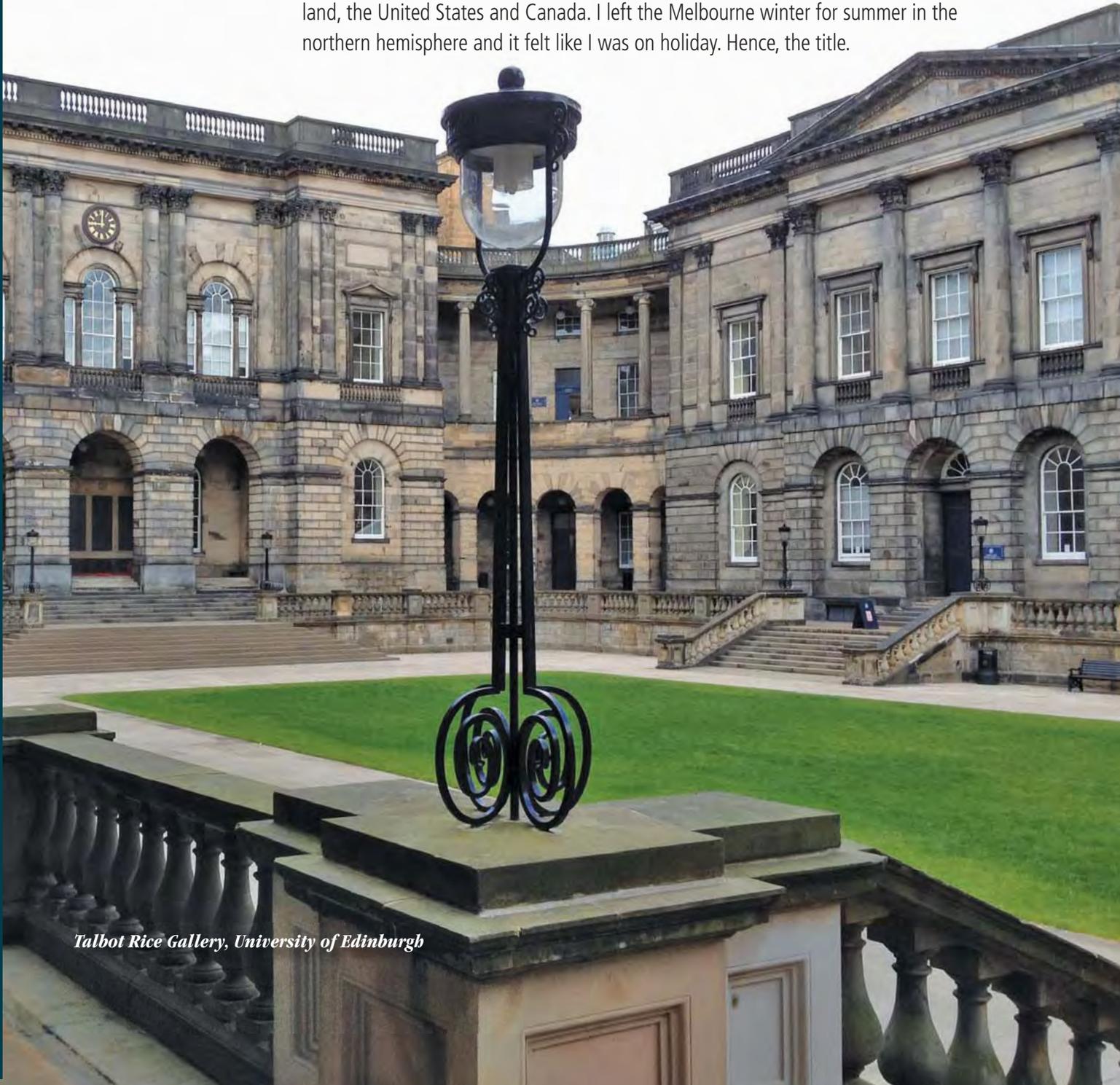


What I Learnt about Interdisciplinary Research Collaboration on My Summer ‘Vacation’

By Simon Kerr

The way research is carried out is changing. Researchers and research institutions are confronting the grand challenges, the tough, large scale, and complex problems that require new forms of research collaboration to resolve. I recently had the opportunity to explore these changes more thoroughly through a Universitas 21 Scholarship provided by the University of Melbourne, Australia. The question I started with was: How can universities best facilitate collaborative interdisciplinary research collaboration (IRC)? To answer this, I travelled for two months, via Singapore to Europe, Finland, Norway, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the United States and Canada. I left the Melbourne winter for summer in the northern hemisphere and it felt like I was on holiday. Hence, the title.



Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh



University of Nottingham Innovation Park



Technology and Innovation Centre Industry Engagement Building, University of Strathclyde Glasgow

Here is a taste of what I learnt:

1 I walk into a meeting with a senior professor. He has been asked to meet with this interloper from a colonial outpost on the edge of the known world. He looks bored, disinterested, disengaged. We start talking, I tell him what I have been thinking, ask him a few questions. An hour later his research colleague is dragging him unwillingly out of the room because he is 30 minutes late for his next appointment (repeat scenario many times over). Lesson: There is a very high level of interest in IRC.

2 Everyone I talked to belonged to a connected network of scholars and researchers. Ok, it was a self selecting group, but they were by far the most dynamic researchers on campus (which was why I got to talk to them). Lesson: The future (and a large chunk of the present) does not belong to the traditional lone scholar, even in the humanities. Contemporary societal challenges

will only be addressed through the cooperation of the many.

3 Ego is a funny thing; many of the leading researchers I met had it in spades, but they also were able to rein in that ego to successfully collaborate with a wide range of people and across diverse disciplinary cultures. Individuals cannot solve the grand challenges alone. Lesson: Cooperation is the spirit of the contemporary research effort (in universities at least). The group is more important than the individual.

4 Most new Ph.D. students are now Gen Y (whatever *that* is). But it does mean that their cultural context is different from the previous generations. The role identity of 'academic' or 'researcher' is also changing. The United Kingdom research councils fund doctoral training centres (DTC) which train cohorts of students across multidisciplinary environments, embedding soft skills with familiarity and consistent exposure to disciplines other than their own. Lesson: New generation researchers, in general, will be more familiar and comfortable with IRC than previous generations. It will (is) changing their expectations of what doing research means.

5 Some researchers in the UK have been visiting the **sandpit*** a radical funding process used by UK funding agencies to disrupt traditional ways of thinking about research problems and bring together novel interdisciplinary projects to seek new solutions to the big challenges. Lesson:

*<http://knowinnovation.com/expertise/sandpit>

Interdisciplinary is a conscious activity and IRC is a mindset.

6 Universities were established around historically based disciplinary silos. This is their strength, but also their weakness. Silos are hard to see out of, so many universities, faculty and departments I visited were consciously creating connections, deliberately inventing multidisciplinary interaction and exposure for faculty researchers ('science seminars for dummies' is how one university described it). Lesson: We must consciously invest in bridging the disciplinary gaps if we are to see effective IRC.

7 These trends add to the demands of time and skill on active academics. As funding gets more problem focused, collaborations larger, and interdisciplinarity complicates communication, many academics need the support of skilled professional staff. This stuff needs facilitation. Lesson: Research administrators and managers had better take these trends seriously because we will have to be as creative as our research colleagues in making all this happen. ■



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