

CHAPTER 2

Centres and institutes as academic organisational units

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Introduction

A complex network of factors arise when academic organisational units are established or existing units are changed. These factors include academic values, convictions about the academic standards of disciplines or professional programmes, ideals and sentiments for the future and particular approaches of disciplines and/or professions. Then it becomes significant how power is used in staff appointments and in the allocation of resources, as the custodian of academic reputation plus individual and institutional development processes. In many universities traditions and customs determine how such issues are considered, debated and decided or are transformed into institutional policies and rules.

Academic organisation is a well-researched sub-field of study in areas such as Higher Education Studies, Organization and Management Studies and Public Administration Studies. Weick (1976) argued that universities could be understood as federations of loosely linked sub-units in which faculties, schools, departments and centres are highly differentiated and autonomous but with sufficient features in common that they are capable of adapting to one another and also to external events or forces. Later though, Orton and Weick (1990) pointed out that “loosely coupled” does not mean “decoupled”.

Earlier, Becher (1989) viewed universities as combinations of academic tribes whilst Scott (1999) suggested that leaders are constantly confronted by challenges related to generalisation and specialisation in academic organisation. Later though, Frost et al (2001) argued that higher education leaders constantly seek to create innovative intellectual initiative. In a lighter vein, a colleague once characterised our faculty’s departmental chairs as ‘a loose alliance of warring tribes’.

This chapter focuses on academic organisational units other than academic departments, namely bureaux, centres, divisions, groups, institutes or units. When a request to establish a new centre is made a question usually arises: ‘What would the centre do or add which the academic department cannot do or should in any case do as part of its core activities?’ With this chapter I want to contribute to one of the earlier four focus areas in Eli Bitzer’s academic career, namely, academic leadership and management, and seek a better understanding of “the immense complexity of university work and the multiple layers of academic and administrative bureaucracy academic leaders and managers were confronted with” (Bitzer 2009:311).

Approach

This is based on a study of Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences’ centres at a South African research-intensive university conducted during 2015. Mallon maintains that “... academic medicine is likely to have more research centres and institutes in the future” (2006:511). This applies to most fields of study, not only medicine, since Mallon and Bunton point out that “[c]ollaborative research efforts throughout the university have made the once-rigid boundaries between departments, schools, and institutions more permeable and fluid” (2005:1005). Similarly, Sá (2008) argues that “[w]hile centres allow universities the opportunity to advance innovative research and gather resources, they also raise organizational and administrative issues”.

This faculty had 13 centres and institutes whose constitutions and annual reports were the basis for my study. Often the constitution’s information is aspirational reflecting the ideals when the centre was established, and differs from the centre’s actual activities as shown in annual reports. Interviews were conducted with the directors and other staff members of the 13 centres plus the members of the faculty’s executive management group. My questions to the interviewees were:

1. How would you describe the identity of your centre? What makes it unique?
2. What do you consider to be the greatest achievements and highlights of the work of your centre in recent years?
3. What are the most important challenges facing your centre?

4. What opportunities do you see for your centre?
5. What would you like to change with regard to your centre?
6. What criteria would you use, if you were the dean and you have to consider an application to establish a new centre, to decide whether you are going to allow it or not?

Using documentary analysis and interviews, the centres' level of compliance with institutional policy on academic centres was tested from which I developed criteria for the establishment of new centres or institutes.

Historical overview of the development of academic centres

Geiger (1990) ascribes the development of the academic centre in distinction from the academic department (Organized Research Units, ORUs in literature) to features of USA universities after World War 2 (WW2). American universities' academic departments stood in contrast to the Continental model of the Research Chair that characterised the German research university development during the 19th century. Geiger (1990:2) suggests that the continental organisational entity conferred "long-lived monopoly over large intellectual domains upon a single irremovable individual" that developed into inflexible entities unlikely to accommodate additional specialities. However, more flexible academic departments with a broader disciplinary focus gave security to academics and developed research units providing types of research that did not fit into departmental structures.

This was a decisive factor in post-war expansion of American university research systems. These ORUs initially fulfilled critical mediating roles between the knowledge demands of society and knowledge production capacity of university researchers. ORUs are 20th century phenomena including the endowed medical and other federal laboratories in the USA. By 1950 the National Institutes of Health had emerged as chief patrons of medical research. After 1950 the National Science Foundation was created. Federal research funds through these bodies were mostly allocated to "programmatic research" to further the agendas of sponsoring agencies rather than "uncommitted" research. Geiger (1990:10) presents the forms and purposes of organized and sponsored university research in the following continuum:

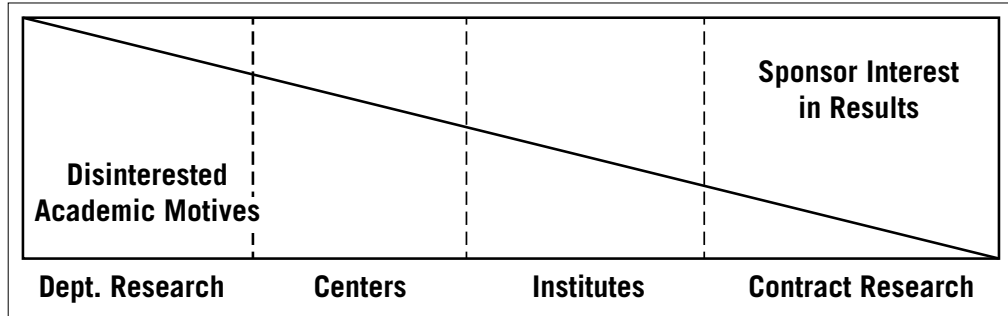


Figure 2.1 Forms and purposes of sponsored university research (Source: Geiger 1990)

The centres were often intended to facilitate interdisciplinary investigations while researchers remained in their established academic departments and maintained strong disciplinary attachments plus the security of departmental appointments. The research undertaken by the centres was predominantly academic and supported by outside agencies, often for non-academic reasons. The centre was characterized by closer links between the research performed and its explicit usefulness for sponsors. Universities hosted such centres/institutes retaining the loyalty of key academics/researchers thus providing service to the government and other sponsors whilst also enhancing institutional prestige. Highly prestigious universities were particularly attractive to sponsors including Harvard, Columbia, Berkeley (the basis of the Lawrence Laboratory), MIT (associated with the Manhattan Project and the Lincoln Laboratory founded in 1951). The inherent flexibility of the university research system exemplified internal adaptation to the conditions of the external changing research economy (Yutchman and Seashore, 1967).

After WW2 the ORUs and departmental research proliferated. In the sixties the USA experienced a massive increase in spending on basic research. After the stagnation in funding levels during the 1970s, universities responded in the 1980s with establishing more centres enabling them to access funding from external sponsors. Centres enabled universities to adjunct their basic research mission to their instructional (teaching and learning) mission in highly flexible ways. ORUs undertake what departments cannot do namely “to operate in interdisciplinarity, applied, or capital intensive areas in response to social demands for new knowledge... ORUs serve to buffer the academic core of the university from distortions that social demands would cause if they had to be in a departmental context” (Geiger

1990:17). The accomplishments of the American research university since WW2 depended on “the vitality of the academic disciplines lodged within departments and the capacity to supplement this underlying departmental structure with a diverse and protean assemblage of research units” (Geiger 1990:17).

Characteristics of academic centres

The study of Mallon and Bunton (2005) uses data gathered through surveying 604 centre/institute directors at 57 university medical schools, supplemented by interviews with academic staff members and managers at six medical schools. According to directors’ opinions, centre numbers are expected to increase and become more important. However, they will not replace academic departments nor usurp the power of academic departments.

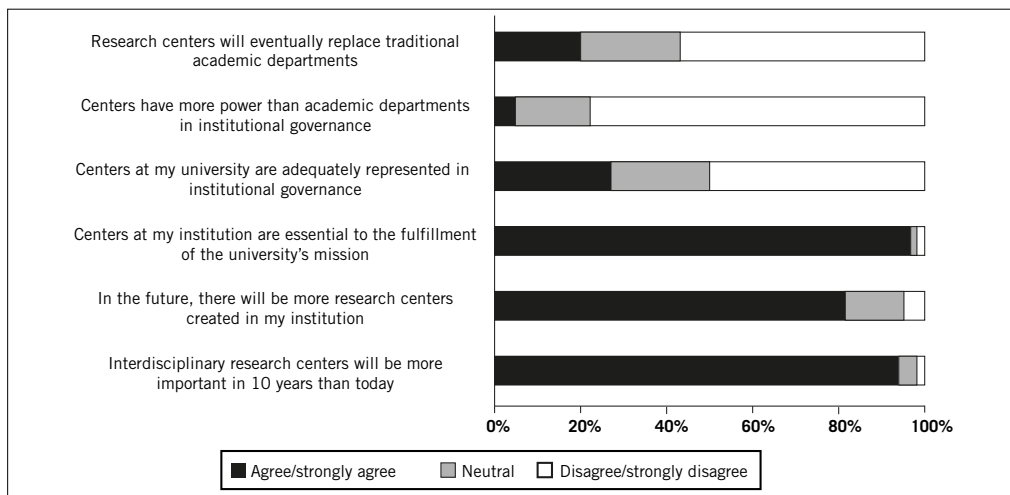


Figure 2.2 Results of a survey of opinions of CBI directors in the USA (Source: Mallon and Bunton 2005:1007)

Mallon and Bunton (2005:1010) point out that

[t]wo primary types of centres and institutes emerged from our data. The first type, comprising the vast majority of centres is modest, even marginal. These centres and institutes have a limited yet important role in the biomedical research enterprise, but must work collaboratively with academic departments and other centres to achieve their goals and mission because

they neither independently control faculty appointment and compensation nor have substantial resources.

The second type, perhaps only 10%-15% of the total, may be more independent and may have a more significant role in the organization and governance of the medical school and university and in the ways that researchers interact within and across academic divisions. These ‘power centres’, which report directly to a university president, provost, or the like, tend to have larger staffs and more financial resources than other centres and institutes, and no doubt have considerable prestige and visibility because of their position within the university hierarchy.

Later, Mallon (2006) reported on research among academics in six USA medical schools during 2004 to solicit views on the benefits and characteristics of using centres/institutes in academic research enterprises, suggesting that:

... the type of centre matters. Centres and institutes are catch-all labels that refer to many different kinds or organizational units. Some are inconsequential “letter-head” centres that exist only in the director’s mind; others are large organized research units with considerable institutional resources. In decision-making it is crucial to know what type of centre is being discussed, and for what purpose it was created (Mallon 2006:511)

Based on these interviews Mallon (2006) reports that centres offer certain benefits: aid in recruiting and retaining academic staff, facilitating collaboration in research, securing research resources, offering a sense of community, backgrounds to learn each other’s language and culture, promoting continued learning, affording organizational flexibility and focusing on societal problems.

Despite these benefits, centres may create tensions and present management challenges to institutional leaders. They compete with departments over resources so that turf battles ignite when centres usurp or are bequeathed departmental prerogatives such as appointing academic staff (Mallon 2006:512), thereby complicating academic staff recruitment, contributing to fragmented missions, posing governance problems or impeding the development of junior academics.

Studying policy and planning documents and reports of centres at 100 leading research universities worldwide and interviewing 45 senior managers/centre directors on six campuses, Sá (2008) highlighted these characteristics:

1. Centres extend the academic mission of universities by re-arranging/re-directing faculty research efforts towards areas deemed important by external agents fulfilling multiple roles and functions in addition to research.
2. The establishment of centres is seen as important due to the organizational flexibility they afford.
3. They can take on multiple and various forms:
 - a. Some centres typically emerge from the bottom up relying on the common interests of participants and discretionary resources accrued from academic units with which they are linked, and/or from external sources (i.e. The Desmond Tutu TB Centre).
 - b. Some are organised around a dedicated laboratory, which might host teams of investigators on an agreed basis (i.e. The DST Centre of Excellence in Biomedical Tuberculosis Research).
 - c. Those with academic identities behave as ‘schools without walls’, partnering with academic units to offer degrees, co-recruit academic staff and select post-docs and graduate students – these centres may evolve into departments or schools.
 - d. Some are umbrella organizations that coordinate several units in a broad area of research, encompassing many of the entities listed above (i.e. The Family Clinical Research Unit).
4. Centres may be created to meet external expectations/requirements of sponsors (i.e. SUNHeart).
5. Many centres are expected to support themselves through research grants with reliable financial plans and sound projections of research productivity from scientific teams using centres’ facilities as business models of economic rationality and efficiency.
6. Over time, centres may develop unique identities becoming significant sources of funding, student/academic talent and prestige.

7. Centre directors need scientific credibility to command the respect of peers, the scientific community and to attract personnel to the unit.
8. Universities find that centres are easier to create than to terminate, despite the widespread existence of policies for periodical evaluation.
9. University and faculty managers have to consider how much autonomy centres should receive.
10. Depending on organizational cultures, climates, histories, incentive and reward structures, and leadership characteristics, strained and even antagonistic relations may develop among centres and departments.

Similar findings are presented by Larson and Barnes-Moorhead (1992), Coen et al. (2010), and Stahler and Tash (2013). From this evidence it became clear that many of the findings of these studies hold true for this faculty, and probably also across different faculties and universities.

A framework for decision-making on the establishment of new academic centres

Based on the evidence the following framework of principles and criteria is advanced for institutional level academic managers to use when considering the establishment of new academic centres.

1. There is a convincing **academic justification** to establish the proposed centre based on the theory, practice, or methodology of the proposed theme, and/or national and/or international academic priorities and goals.
2. The academic focus area of the proposed centre is **unique** and not identical to an established academic discipline or sub-discipline in the faculty or university.
3. The achievement of the proposed centre's mission and goals will require **collaboration** across academic fields of study, and/or different departments in the faculty and beyond. This requires that there are existing/likely partnerships with the key role player(s) in prospective centres/universities.
4. The achievement of mission and the goals of proposed centres will be in the form of **academic outputs** in one or more core academic activities of

the university indicating that it is advancing science and addressing gaps in knowledge or methodology, creating education and training opportunities for knowledge-based community interaction.

5. The vision, mission, goals and strategic priorities of the prospective centre are **aligned** so that the achievement of the goals will yield strategic advantages for the faculty/university.
6. There is a **track record** of success in the environment within which it will be based.
7. The **prompter** for establishing the proposed centre should be the expertise and interests of existing academic staff members.
8. There are reasonable prospects that the proposed centre will be **financially viable and sustainable**, with a convincing business plan and outside funding before it is established plus key personnel with appropriate experience of successful fundraising.

In conclusion

The missions and roles of centres are varied, complex and nuanced where the nature of academic work and professional programmes are dynamic. This is true of academic centres at universities across the world (cf. Mallon and Bunton 2005, Sá 2008). Nevertheless, universities will do well to strengthen their support for centres as an important organisational form. Centre directors are usually innovative academic leaders and most are also entrepreneurial. The academic champions in a university must be supported to implement their innovative ideas. Sometimes the individuals involved in centres wear various hats (e.g. as centre director, head of department, occupant of externally-funded research chairs, etc.) and that is not a major problem, provided that mandates of such units are clearly described and maintained.

Although the faculty investigated in this study does distinguish between ‘centre’ or ‘institute’, there is evidence in the history of developing such academic entities to make the following distinction: a ‘centre’ is an intra-faculty entity with a range of collaborators and partnerships inside and outside the faculty, whereas an ‘institute’ is an inter-faculty entity with a range of collaborators and partnerships inside and

outside the faculty. To conclude this discussion in a lighter vein, the preference for ‘research group’, ‘centre’ and ‘institute’ also seems to be linked to factors listed in this comic drawing!

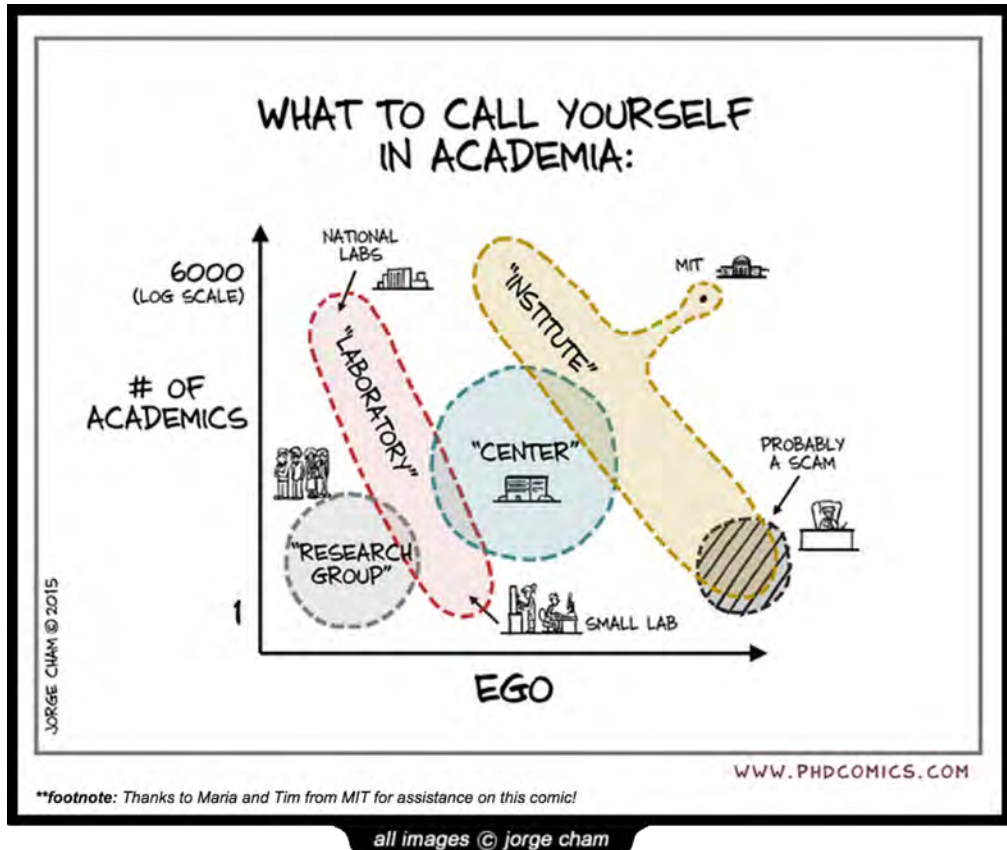


Figure 2.3 What to call yourself in academia

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