

Canadian Institutes in the Humanities and Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the effectiveness and ultimate value of the growing number of research institutes in the humanities and social sciences. It looks at the different types in existence and their geographic distribution. It considers the motivation for and obstacles to establishing research institutes, points to the difficulties involved in their funding and operation and outlines arguments put forward by their proponents. Illustrated with examples are different objectives and functions of various kinds of institutes, their organizational structure and their relationship to the universities. The Max-Planck Institutes in Germany and Institutes of the Social Science Research Council in Britain are described. The paper concludes with a sketch of three fundamental types of institute, each with its own rationale: the academic utopia, the small-scale institute for research in the humanities and the problem-solving or mission-oriented institute.

RESUME

Instituts canadien dans les humanités et les sciences sociales

Cet article, considérant le nombre sans cesse croissant des instituts de recherche en sciences humaines, leur diversité et leur répartition géographique, s'interroge sur leur efficacité et leur valeur. Il examine les raisons qui poussent à la création de tels instituts et celles qui s'y opposent, les difficultés de financement et de fonctionnement rencontrées et, enfin, les arguments avancés par les instigateurs de ces établissements de recherche. Objectifs et fonctions de divers types d'instituts, leur organisation et leurs liens avec les universités sont exposés à partir d'exemples. C'est ainsi qu'on présente les Instituts Max-Planck d'Allemagne fédérale et ceux du Social Science Research Council de Grande-Bretagne. En conclusion, l'article distingue trois grands types originaux d'instituts: l'"utopie universitaire", le petit institut de recherche en sciences humaines et l'institut à vocation heuristique spécialisé.

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Rising expectations are being voiced concerning the contribution of the social sciences to the solution of social problems. It is not therefore surprising that social scientists frequently express the view that their academic interests – and by extension, the public interest – would best be served by the establishment and maintenance of research institutes where, freed from teaching, they could carry out long-term research relevant to the needs of society. They argue that the departmental structure of the universities operates to the disadvantage of those wishing to carry out the interdisciplinary research needed to come up with solutions to complex problems.

Are institutes in fact indispensable to the conduct of interdisciplinary research – or do they tend to lead to the generation of artificial problems? Are they going to be a key type of academic organization in the future or, where they have sprung up, are they simply cases of academic empire-building? Do the humanists need institutes as well as the social scientists, to optimize their research efforts?

With these and other questions in mind we thought it would be interesting to look at the picture presented by existing Canadian centres and institutes in the humanities and social sciences.

Motivation for the Establishment of Institutes

Institutes are set up for practical reasons which are expressed in the statements of their individual goals or purposes. Although these vary from case to case, they frequently include a reference to the need to carry out research crossing disciplinary boundaries and to play some role currently not provided for within the established university structure.

In material terms, institutes may contribute to the aggrandizement of the university in several ways. They attract funds, some of which are used to pay personnel, some of which pay for library and other material resources which remain permanently with the university. By encouraging focused research activity which can lead to the development of special expertise, and by attracting good scholars, they enhance the university's reputation. In some cases, by giving a high profile to research in an area of social concern, institutes provide the university with a claim to "relevance" which fosters goodwill in the community. This kind of visibility is made possible by the fact that an Institute with a high degree of autonomy may be free to conduct its own program of publication, to hold seminars and give public lectures, to publish a journal and to participate in community activity in a way which is not possible for a university department.

From the perspective of the individual scholar, institutes provide a suitable environment for intensive research and, thus, the opportunity for him to improve his knowledge and advance his career. With a group of colleagues he can participate in the multi-faceted longer-term program which lends itself to graduate student involvement and participation. As a result, many graduate students choose institute-supported topics for their thesis research.

Growth of Institutes

It has proved impossible to produce statistics showing the pattern of growth in number of Canadian institutes in the area of the humanities and social sciences over the last ten years, but it can safely be said that they have proliferated. We have been able to track down 159,

of which 106 (66%) are in the social sciences, 25 (16%) in the humanities, and 28 (17%) involve both the humanities and the social sciences.

Almost all institutes in the humanities are in Ontario and Quebec and all are affiliated with a university. The only concentrations of interest appear to be in French Canadian Studies and Religious Studies, four centres being devoted to each of these. The remaining centres are involved in a wide variety of fields.

Included among the 106 institutes and centres devoted to the social sciences are 20 which are not university-affiliated, and in the 28 centres involving both humanities and social sciences 3 are not university-affiliated. For the purposes of a grouping by area of interest all of these types are considered together. The main concentrations are as follows: (In round brackets is the number without university affiliation, those in square brackets deal with both the humanities and social sciences.)

Economics	17	(2)	
International Studies	12	(2)	[5]
Urban Studies	9	(1)	[2]
Environmental Studies	9		
Education	7		
Transportation	7		
Law	6	(1)	
Industrial Relations	6		
Northern Studies	6	(1)	[1]
Socio-Economic Development	6		
Psychology	5	(1)	[1]
Public Administration	3		
Canadian Studies	2		[2]
Criminology	2		
General	5		[5]
Other	32	(5)	[12]
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	134	(23)	[38]

Of the institutes in Economics, the majority (12) are in Ontario, while 5 of the 6 in Socio-Economic Development are in Quebec. 7 of the 12 centres in International Studies are in Ontario as are 5 of the 9 in Urban Studies. The 6 in Northern Studies are equally divided between the Prairies and Quebec. There are very few institutes in British Columbia or the Prairie provinces.

With increasing financial stringency, universities are now clamping down on the formation of institutes which might become a liability to them – and in the case of those already in existence, periodic evaluation is being carried out to ensure that continued support is warranted.

The situation at Calgary is worth examining in some detail. The University is prepared, in partnership with others, to participate in and contribute to the establishment of independent research institutes affiliated with or located on the campus of the University, and

from which the University may derive benefits. Such agreements are entered into by and with the approval of the Board on the recommendation of the University Research Committee. The University is likewise prepared to enter into agreements with existing independent research institutes, to itself establish research institutes or to give official recognition to University Research Groups where such recognition is required for the effective conduct of the group's affairs or as a requirement for external funding.

In some instances, where the full and long-term partnership of the University is judged to be essential to the realization of benefits from the presence of an institute, the form of association or partnership will reflect these needs and provide for direct institutional participation in the governance of the institute for the integration and coordination of University/institute affairs.

The degree of participation or university contribution to the establishment and maintenance of independent research institutes at the University of Calgary is normally a function of the degree to which the presence of the institute contributes to the academic and scholarly objectives of the university, and, as appropriate, the degree to which the University may serve community needs by its participation. The above considerations will, in turn, determine the nature of the formal relationship between the institute and the university. In no case will the University's material contribution be disproportionately large in relation to that of other sponsors. It may include, for example, the time of academic staff, space, facilities or service, or occasionally, direct financial aid. Once an institute is set up, evaluation will be carried out after a predetermined period of time to determine whether continued support is justified.

Whatever the precise arrangement within any university, it is clear that financial commitment on its part to new initiatives is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain; and where given, it may well be accompanied by a cautionary statement to the effect that the university should not be expected to assume financial liability for the institute should other sponsors or partners withdraw.

Nature and Function of Institutes

Institutes vary widely, according to their purposes and functions. Purposes may be problem oriented, geographically oriented or thematically oriented. The institute's function may be primarily that of disseminating knowledge through teaching, or primarily that of advancing knowledge through research. Institutes may or may not offer degree programs, focus on a definite field of research, or maintain a special library (though this is a fairly common feature). Staff may range from full-time professional and support personnel, often housed in the institute's quarters, to a small group of professors, with responsibilities in various departments and a common interest in some topic. In the latter circumstance a centre's success will depend on the support and good-will of contributing departments as well as the enthusiasm and energy of those faculty whose cross-appointments apportion part of their salary or time to the centre's work. As the following examples illustrate, along with function and purpose, the relationship of institutes to the university varies.

The Institute of Northern Studies, affiliated with the University of Saskatchewan, is almost entirely research oriented and has a relatively high degree of independence, both financially and administratively, from the university. Funds are received annually from the

Federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. Research grants are obtained from other federal and provincial government departments and from foundations. Operating monies accrue from contract research. The institute also receives some support from the university. The university provides office space, some support staff, and some professional staff through cross-appointments. An Advisory Committee (which includes members from the university, government, industry, and northern representative groups), along with the Director and members of the Institute, formulates policy and programs, and reports annually to the President of the University of Saskatchewan.

In contrast, the Centre for Linguistic Studies at the University of Toronto is an example of a centre very closely integrated into the university's teaching role, and enjoying departmental status. The Centre offers graduate degree programs and has an administrative structure not unlike that of regular graduate departments. Faculty are often cross-appointed and the budget is small.

Despite the fact that the teaching function of the Institute of Commonwealth and Comparative Studies at Queen's is primary, this institute is not set up on the departmental model. It is basically a coordinating centre, facilitating interdisciplinary effort by arranging programs of study and functioning as the point of academic contact in certain fields between Queen's and other universities in the Commonwealth (e.g. by administering exchange programs).

For the large and well-known Institute for Behavioural Research at York University, teaching is largely a by-product of the functions of research and research service. Through its Data Bank, Survey Research Centre and Methods and Analysis Section, the Institute provides advice and research services to members of the university engaged in behavioural science research, while at the same time, members of the Institute conduct their own research projects. Teaching takes the form of summer courses, workshops and other short courses in behavioural research methodology. The Institute was established with a capital grant from York and now receives additional funds from contracts and memberships. The Institute does not fall within any University faculty. It is guided by an Academic Advisory Council, which is representative of all faculties and divisions using its services, and a National Advisory Committee composed of representatives of major universities and government research agencies across Canada.

While the goal of research at some institutes, such as the Centre d'études de la renaissance at Sherbrooke, is the single-minded pursuit of scholarship, at other centres, the research effort is intended to bring the university into closer contact with the surrounding community, usually through a problem-solving approach. Such is the purpose of the Acadia University Institute which was incorporated by Act of the Legislature of Nova Scotia. It was established, "a) to make available to the surrounding community and the Province of Nova Scotia in general some of the academic and scientific resources inherent in the community and in the staff of the University in particular; and b) to conduct research in any field and implement the results of such research which may accrue to the benefit of the Province or adjacent areas." The Institute is completely independent of the University in respect of administration and undertakings. The research it has conducted has in the main been directly related to local concerns, e.g. economic assessment of the feasibility of a ferry service across the Minas Basin.

Organizational Structure

The basic organizational structure common to most university-based institutes is simple. There is a director (or chairman) who is chief administrator and liaison with the university. There is usually a policy-making board composed of representatives of: the university (often including the vice-president (academic) and several professors); the institute (the director and often several other members) and where appropriate, the federal or provincial government or industry. The board is usually responsible to the university senate and president, although in small, informal centres there may not be a board.

While universities may have officially espoused the idea of centres and institutes being affiliated with them, these units do not yet appear to have been fully integrated into the system – and this leads to a conflict of interest on the part of staff. Unless the institute has a large measure of autonomy, staff are normally members of a university department; because this is where career stability lies, faculty members give ultimate allegiance to their disciplines and their departments, despite the fact that their association with an institute is normally voluntary, stemming from an interest in a specific area of research. Having no hold over staff will not infrequently leave the director of the institute in an extremely vulnerable position in terms of its performance, upon which continued funding depends.

Funding

The primary sources of funds for institutes are the parent university, federal and provincial departments, and granting agencies, foundations and industry. Institutes may, depending on their field of research, derive financial support from research contracts obtained from industry (e.g. the Industrial Research Institute of Windsor University) or local governments (e.g. Institute for Resources Development at Guelph). In the early stages of their development, though, institutes have tended to be heavily reliant on university support – although in rare cases institutes have come into existence largely because of the availability of external funding.

Moreover unless an institute has evolved to the status of a university department earning its own way by its teaching load, or until it has achieved widespread recognition it will probably have difficulty in remaining financially viable. In 1969, the Director of the Guelph Centre for Resources Development described the problem of institutes this way:

Without internal (within the university) commitments and incentives to interdisciplinary work, external funding will not be forthcoming; without external funding, the interdisciplinary research cannot be extended, and the internal commitments are not made; because there are few results, the external funding is difficult, and the operation leans heavily on university funds; because of the internal financing competition, the tendency is to downgrade interdisciplinary work and emphasize departmental and so on.

Even if an institute breaks this vicious circle, and becomes established and operative long enough to produce some results and attract some external funding, because of the uncertain status of interdisciplinary work and of the institute itself, it is extremely vulnerable to changing economic conditions. A combination of the loss of government support and economic constraints on the university can all too easily combine to undermine the insti-

tute's financial base. Furthermore, certain types of institutes, especially those such as the Institute for Study in the Humanities at Calgary, are unlikely ever to attract government or industrial contracts, and must rely very heavily on continuous university and private support.

An Argument for the Encouragement of Institutes for Research in the Social Sciences

Eric Trist, who was Chairman of the Tavistock Institute in London between 1958-1966 and who subsequently went to the University of Pennsylvania, has put forward a case for the establishment of institutes in his article "Social research institutions: types, structures, scale"¹. His main argument runs as follows: science has been changing: so has policy. While the former has become more policy-aware, the latter has become more science aware. When the rate of change was slower, policy could be largely corrective, acting after the event. With a faster change-rate it has to become more anticipatory, which relates it to planning.

The changed relationship of science and policy has led to a new type of activity, namely, problem-oriented research. If fundamental research is discipline-based, problem-oriented research may be said to be domain-based. Domain-based inquiry links a group of sciences to a major sector of public concern. This type of research has experienced difficulties not only in securing recognition as a distinct activity but in finding appropriate organizational settings. This is scarcely surprising since it represents the confluence of key emergent trends in both science and policy.

Professor Trist goes on to assert that the effective development of the social sciences towards the needs of the future requires the establishment of genuinely programmatic research sustained over long periods of time on carefully selected themes by institutes with the stability, scale and 'requisite variety' of resources to enable them to commit their members to such objectives. He believes that there is too great a dispersion of research effort in small and unstable organizations which has led to a random accumulation of projects rather than an evolving cumulation of findings. Amongst other reasons for this, he blames the persistence of a tradition of academic individualism among research workers.

It would however appear from the experience of the Social Science Research Council in England that Dr. Trist's solution to such fragmentation is easier to elaborate than to implement. Five years ago, they decided to set up research centres in Industrial Relations, Ethnic Relations, Survey Research and Socio-Legal Studies. The relationship to the nearby university differed in each case; their purpose was to encourage:

- a) large scale or sustained research which was virtually impossible to carry out within the university system;
- b) research in newly developing fields of study where the university structure was not sufficiently flexible to give these fields the required rapid growth;
- c) research in problem areas requiring multidisciplinary work;
- d) outstanding individual research workers needing a supporting team and freedom from the necessity of foraging for short-term funds.

1. *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. XXII No. 2 1970.

The SSRC's initiative has not however met with unqualified success despite the fact that they offered five-year full-time appointments to researchers. It has, it seems, not been easy to attract first-rate scholars because of their reluctance to step outside the university hierarchy. A further problem has been that directors have had their task made difficult because of the unwillingness of researchers in the centres to take direction; they have insisted upon complete freedom to pursue their own interests within the general theme under study.

Max-Planck Institutes

By contrast, the Max-Planck Institutes in Germany have proved to be a highly durable and successful venture. The Max-Planck Gesellschaft was founded in 1911 to promote and support scientific research, especially through research institutes. Its functions are:

- to foster newly developing areas of activity and working methods, especially in marginal areas which are but slowly gaining access into the universities, where work is subject to demands made by teaching;
- to develop new types of institutes and to further research projects which are so extensive and which call for such complex facilities that universities hesitate to undertake them;
- to free eminent scientists from teaching duties and to enable them to make full use of working facilities designed to their requirements;
- within the framework of these functions, to provide training facilities for young scientists by making available grants and scholarships as well as by maintaining training centres.

At present 48 institutes are maintained through this organization, 39 carrying out research in the natural sciences, (92% of the budget) the remainder specializing in the humanities. 85% of their funds come from federal and 'Länder' governments, the remainder from their own resources (memberships, donations, patents, etc.).

The institutes have very close ties with the universities. The former are not able to grant doctoral degrees or professorial status. This authority rests solely with the universities, which provide a reservoir of young researchers for the institutes which in turn provide training facilities for large numbers of students completing their doctoral theses. It should be noted too that researchers at Max-Planck Institutes accept teaching duties at the university as associate lecturers, for example, to introduce new areas of research into the curriculum.

The institutes of the MPG also maintain close ties with research organizations and institutes abroad. They cooperate with EURATOM, EMBO and OECD and give financial assistance to international scientific organizations abroad, including the Neurosciences Research Program in the U.S..

Conclusion

It is clear that any conclusions as to the rationale for the existence of an institute must be looked at in the light of the type of institute under discussion.

1. *The academic utopia.*

Canada has no Institute for Advanced Study, such as the one in Princeton, "devoted to the

encouragement, support and patronage of learning — of science in the old, broad differentiated sense of the word”². It would be difficult to make the claim that such an institute would be directly relevant to the needs of contemporary society. But there is widespread belief that a significant contribution would be made to Canadian scholarship by the existence of a prestigious national institution where eminent and promising scholars, freed from teaching and administrative responsibilities for a year or two, could pursue their own research interests in a lively intellectual atmosphere.

2. The small-scale institute for research in the humanities.

There is widespread mistrust of research which is not easily quantified and therefore measurable and which often has little direct bearing on contemporary problems. This mistrust is reflected in the very small proportion of funds, public or private, which are available to subsidize such research. It is therefore not surprising that humanists are anxious to give visibility to their area of interest. An institute devoted to the humanities, in accomplishing this objective, can at the same time be expected to attract high quality scholarship by providing a setting conducive to the advancement of humanistic research and inquiry.

3. The problem solving or mission-oriented institute.

It is arguable that under the right conditions such institutes, by bringing an interdisciplinary approach to social problems, can provide governments with the insight and data needed for the development of enlightened social and economic policies. There is no dearth of mission-oriented research institutes in Canada. It is, however, difficult to assess whether they are contributing in any significant way to the lofty purpose visualized for them by Dr. Trist, and if they are not, whether an uncomfortable relationship within the university organizational structure, uncertain funding and academic individualism are impediments to this taking place.

The large number of existing institutes in the social sciences does indicate that there is strong motivation to escape from the departmental structure of the universities to facilitate inter-disciplinary work. This being so, further study needs to be given to the problems of integration of institutes into the university system and structure so that they can better discharge their responsibilities. Thought should be given to possible viable alternatives to institutes in marshalling academic expertise on a major scale to attack important social problems calling for an inter-disciplinary approach. Perhaps these needs could be met by a structured group run by an executive committee and a chairman reporting to the vice-president (academic) or other appropriate person and given formal recognition within the university.

The system operating in the Max-Planck Institutes might profitably be examined, whereby researchers having primary allegiance to their institute play an important role in training graduate students and accept lectureships in the university, to ensure cross-fertilization of ideas.

All these avenues should be explored before there is resort to setting up institutes staffed by full-time researchers having no commitments to a university. For assured funding and insulation from academic reality could well lead to the generation of artificial problems and to academic empire-building.

2. The Institute for Advanced Study: some introductory information.