

'Just call yourself a centre': Unpacking the founding moments of research centres

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper makes the case that greater attention in the higher education (HE) research field would usefully to be paid to research centres as an under-researched but ubiquitous phenomenon, which is shaped by a range of dynamics in the HE sector. The paper explores the founding of research centres, including the ways in which existing studies have discussed founding, and then the ways in which research centre webpages and centre founders represent the beginnings of the centres. The study underpinning the paper focused on UK-based education-related research centres with an orientation towards inclusivity, equity and/or social justice; the study included a website review of 44 centres and five in-depth narrative interviews with centre founders. The paper unpacks notions of founding and founder by exploring the range of HE sector dynamics and different actors which enter into the founding of research centres.

Full paper

Introduction and Literature Review

Research centres are a common phenomenon in global higher education (HE) (Etzkowitz & Kemelgor, 1998), but they are an under-researched phenomenon. Extant literature on centres is often oriented to a field of study (e.g. cultural studies, Connell & Hilton, 2015; urban studies, van Heur, 2023), is somewhat disparately located across disciplines and not does necessarily address centres as a HE phenomenon. This paper focuses on the founding of research centres with an explicit social justice orientation from a HE perspective, arguing that the founding of research centres and their values is situated amidst various HE sector dynamics.

Literature on research centres often starts from the premise that research centres already exist, and focuses on the activities of centres (Lind et al., 2013) or evaluating their outcomes (Tiler & Boddington, 1993). Where founding is addressed in existing literature on

research centres, there is a sense of the 'story' beginning with the inception of the centre. For instance, researchers have focused on government policy drives to set up centres and the effect of these policies on academic research (Nyhagen & Baschung, 2013; Pereira-Puga & Sanz-Menéndez, 2024). A detailed study of the working practices of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, UK (Connell & Hilton, 2015) presents a nuanced portrayal of the institutional and sector dynamics that fed into founding the centre, including the politics of campus space and academic contracts. This paper draws on these traces of founding stories and analyses the multiple dynamics and actors that are involved in setting up centres and establishing their values.

The Study

This paper is based on an empirical study that was funded by the University of Warwick Institute of Advanced Study and was conducted in 2024 (Henderson, Burford & Hopkins, 2025). The study was entitled 'The heart of research: Exploring the aims, nature and values of education research centres' and focused on UK-based education-related centres with an explicit inclusivity, equity and/or social justice orientation. Firstly, a webpage review was conducted of 44 centres which met these criteria. Webpages were analysed thematically; in this paper we focus on the representation of founding in the webpages. Secondly, in-depth narrative interviews were conducted with five centre founders. Participants were selected from the webpage sample where the centre was active and the founder could be contacted. The narrative interviews centred on the founding of the centres.

Findings

There was a notable silence on the webpages about the founding of the centres. Only six centres (of 44) included the date of founding, and only two named the centre founder. Other information about founding was largely absent. The narrative interviews with founders presented rich and complex narratives of how centres were founded, and it was clear that the conditions in which centres were set up influenced the nature and values of the centres. This paper focuses on two key findings from the narrative interviews. Firstly, we argue that founding centres is a long-term process where it is difficult to point to the beginning. Centres - and their core values - emerge amidst institutional responses to the REF (Research Excellence Framework; the research evaluation process in UK HE), funder priorities, and academics' own prior involvement in other research centres. Secondly, our study revealed the need to explore the range of actors involved in founding centres and their varying roles in developing a centre's values. In some centres in our study, the institutional process of setting up the centre was not accomplished by the founding director, and a range of actors with different interests was involved in the process.

Conclusion

In this paper, we contribute to the scarce extant research on research centres, bringing a HE field perspective to researching this ubiquitous but under-researched phenomenon.

Research centres often bear the responsibility of conducting innovative, high quality research and their performance boosts universities' reputations (Etzkowitz & Kemelgor, 1998), and yet there is little research evidence about how centres come to be. This paper locates the founding of research centres within wider trends in the HE sector, advancing a conceptualisation of founding which unpacks the moment of founding, and instead focuses on the range of priorities and actors involved in founding centres and establishing their values. As such, the paper argues for greater attention to research centres as a phenomenon for HE research in future years. The paper also offers implications surrounding how various actors, pressures, and HE dynamics shape how centre values are represented, engaged with and enacted.