



Research Institutions

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Research Institutions

Chapter 9 of *Research in the Humanities and the Social Sciences: Report of a Survey by the British Academy 1958–1960* (London, 1961: Oxford University Press), 60–4



6 Burlington Gardens, London W1, home of the British Academy in 1961

110. *Types of institution.* There are two main divisions into which Western research institutions at present fall: (A) general research institutes, i.e. those in which several different fields of study are pursued by individuals or groups, independently of each other; and (B) specialised institutes, i.e. those devoted to a single subject or

group of cognate subjects all of which fall within a roughly definable field.

Across this division there runs another, equally important, division of institutions into (1) the 'pure', i.e. those devoted to pure research, unrelated to teaching or the training of experts, at any rate as an obligation, and (2) the 'mixed', i.e. those which combine research with teaching or graduate work by students.¹ (There are many other differences of organisation or purpose, e.g. relations to universities, source of income, etc., but these seem less decisive factors.)

111. *The traditional British system.* Over and above such research institutions, there is the type of arrangement of which our own country offers the best example, where the bulk of research is carried on in institutions not primarily devoted to it, namely in universities and to a lesser degree museums and libraries etc., for the most part by individuals holding fellowships or research grants in their individual capacities and largely free to pursue any subject broadly approved of by the institutions to which they belong.

112. *General research institutes.* From a general survey of the functioning of these institutions, and of the opinions expressed about them by those who have the most intimate experience of their working, it does not seem clear that there is any exceptional advantage to be gained from the creation of 'general' research institutes, where scholars in various fields are gathered under the same roof in a 'scholarly community'. Excellent as the work done by individual members of such institutions often is, opinions differ widely about the value both of the gathering together of specialists in dissimilar fields, and of research divorced from teaching. The high hopes of 'interdisciplinary research' and [61] 'cross-fertilisation between different fields' at one time expressed by the founders of such institutions, especially in the United States in the 1930s, do not on the whole seem to have materialised. As for results in terms of communication and diffusion of knowledge, while some members of such institutes are clearly far more

¹ See Appendix A.

productive than they would have been had they been obliged to teach or administer, others appear to have grown less fruitful through transplantation. There is wide agreement about the very high calibre of the individual work done by, for example, the senior members of the Princeton Institute;² and also about the great benefit which younger scholars can derive from working with them as temporary members. What its critics question is whether, in the field of the humanities, conditions for such work do not exist already in well-endowed and enlightened American universities.

113. *Specialised institutes.* The best examples of these are probably to be found in Germany.³ Their usefulness, too, is a matter of dispute; there is no doubt, however, that at their best (and this is not rare) such small concentrations of specialists in intellectually favourable conditions create a genuine intellect *esprit de corps*. They function as recognised centres for the subjects in question; cooperation and connection with them confers real academic advantages; they maintain the standards of teaching in universities; and association with them is – at any rate in Germany – a source of pride and status among the teachers. These German institutions have an old and powerful, if not always unbroken, tradition: they are today again a major source of intellectual light in the world of international learning.

114. *Advantages of the British system.* It is claimed on behalf of the British system that it offers individuals greater freedom of research and greater independence of status; that it makes possible a wider choice of subjects, and in particular offers an encouragement to break away from routine or over-subsidised fields of learning; and also that research thrives better in the midst of other intellectual activities such as teaching and the flow of general academic life, even if the researcher himself is not obliged, and does not choose, to take part in such teaching or administrative activities. It seems in general to be true that, although some men produce their best work freed from all teaching (as well as administrative) duties, the

² See Appendix A, para. 1.

³ See Appendix A, para. 4.

majority of scholars, for their own intellectual well-being, need association with students at some level.

[62] 115. *Advantages of specialised institutes.* It has been represented to us that:

(a) Some subjects cannot well be pursued by isolated researchers, e.g. archaeology, anthropology or 'field' sociology, and other pursuits which require teamwork.

(b) Even in subjects which are best pursued individually, the mere presence together of a number of specialists in the same field under the roof of a single specialised institution creates, if the researchers are of sufficient quality, a tradition, discipline and atmosphere in which such work is better done than by men working in isolation. Experience in all parts of the world shows that such institutions, when they are successful, acquire prestige which itself helps to maintain high standards, which in their turn raise and maintain the level of learning in the subject beyond the bounds of the institution itself.

(c) Cooperative work by specialists itself often leads to the discovery of new aspects or branches of a subject, and thus to much fruitful and original work.

(d) Such institutes can act as 'staff colleges' where the young researcher can learn what needs doing and how to act about doing it, thus checking the sense of drift and doubt about the needs and possibilities of research which is apt to beset the beginner.

(e) Many scholars in full employment would greatly welcome opportunities of temporary attachment, perhaps for one or two years, to a specialised institute for the purpose of study, or for the completion of a piece of work under the guidance of, or in consultation with, the institute's specialists.

(f) For a young university, association with a specialised institute of nationwide standing may be a valuable source of prestige, and may enable it to attract graduate students of a high calibre who would otherwise have gone elsewhere (cf. para. 11).

116. These are substantial arguments and they can be supported by reference to concrete instances. In the case of a subject which has made great strides in England during the last twenty or thirty

years – the history of art – it is difficult to conceive that so much progress could have occurred without the existence of such a centre of research as the Warburg Institute, now part of [63] London University, with its relations to the Courtauld Institute and to similar institutions in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere. On the other hand philosophy, which has had a comparable flowering, has achieved its present height in the British Isles without such institutes. It is evident that institutes favour particularly the progress of those subjects to which costly research facilities – photographic and other technical equipment, libraries, travel facilities, etc. – are indispensable, as against disciplines (such as philosophy) where they are needed on a far smaller scale.

117. *Difficulties of specialised institutes.* These difficulties are of several kinds:

(a) There is the danger of intellectual isolation, which can eventually make research sterile, as experience elsewhere has too often shown. Only a small minority of humane scholars are suited by temperament to lead a life of pure research over long periods. And the members of a small research institute, even when it is situated in a university town, can experience a very lonely existence on the fringe of university activity unless energetic measures are taken to keep them in contact with the mainstream. In suitable cases the risk may be reduced, though not eliminated, by inviting staff to conduct seminars for graduate or even for undergraduate members of the university; and by requiring that the director of the institute, and perhaps a certain proportion of its members, should also hold academic posts in the university.

(b) The recruitment of suitable junior staff is likely to prove increasingly difficult, as the Germans are finding (cf. Appendix B (iv), para. 15). Prospects of promotion within the institute are usually very limited or non-existent, and lack of adequate teaching experience may often be a fatal handicap in seeking appointments outside it. Here again the introduction of some part-time teaching would be a help, but more generous salary scales in such institutes may also be needed if staff of the right calibre is to be attracted and retained. A partial solution might also be sought through a

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succession of strictly temporary junior appointments; but the work of an institute is apt to suffer where too much of it has to be carried out by inexperienced trainees.

(c) At a time when the country contemplates increasing student numbers by 70 per cent within a decade, and at least three new universities are about to be founded, any proposal to segregate potential university teachers in a new research institute – even in one where part-time teaching is admissible – [64] will inevitably meet with strong opposition.⁴ Such opposition seems likely to be overcome only where it can be shown that the establishment of an institute is indispensable to the healthy development of the subject concerned, and that it would not unduly deplete the available teaching force. In advising on the need for any new institute and on its location and planning, as also in providing finance for it, a national council for research could play a very important part.

118. *Conclusions*

(a) For the reasons indicated in para. 112 we do not recommend the establishment of a general research institute in this country.

(b) Specialised institutes can perform an important service both in the creation and preservation of standards and in the opportunities they can offer to scholars attached to them as temporary members; but the degree of need for them varies widely from discipline to discipline. In subjects involving fieldwork, which is not easily combined with full-time teaching, and in those which require extensive technical equipment and technical assistance, the case for such institutes is very strong. In the older literary subjects the need is generally less urgent.

(c) Where a new specialised institute is established it should be closely associated at all levels with a university, while retaining such powers of self-government as are essential to its freedom. Its director should preferably be a professor of the university, and its

⁴ On the prospective shortage of university teachers see *Report on a Policy for University Expansion*, published by the Association of University Teachers, 1958, pp. 11 ff.

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members should in suitable cases be encouraged to undertake part-time teaching for the university. The type of institute we have in mind would usually require only a very small permanent staff of full-time researchers, perhaps no more than three persons.

(*d*) Where a new institute is established, it should be able to count on the advice of a national central agency and on its help in financing its publications and in providing such technical equipment and technical assistance as can be shown to be necessary to its efficient working.

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