

Consultation Report on Research Centres and Institutes at the University of Regina

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Report on Centres and Institutes (C/Is)

Research Centres and Institutes are critical, outward facing entities, within a research intensive university that have great potential to enhance the research reputation of an institution. C/Is can create productive partnerships with communities, industry, NGOs and government. C/Is help attract top researchers to an institution and provide research answers to difficult societal challenges. However they also present a challenge to a typical university in that they exist outside the typical academic model of Departments and Faculties. Providing a policy framework that enables establishment and successful operation of C/Is a difficult challenge that few institutions have mastered.

Martin Kirk was engaged on a consultant basis by the University of Regina (U of R) to help assess the current state of C/Is and advise on how the policy and processes might be improved, specifically to:

8.1.1 Provide advice on a process to support implementation of the new policy and understand budget implications to have a robust (1) new centre/institute creation process and (2) robust reporting and review process.

8.1.2 Interview with key stakeholders to thoroughly understand the problems that need to be solved with enhanced policy and guidelines.

8.1.3 Provide advice on criteria for supporting VPR decision process to determine level of internal funding support.

8.1.4 Study peer institution templates and recommend templates for creation, annual reports and triennial reviews.

8.1.5 Study, analyze and report on trends on growth and management of research centres from peer institutions.

Dr. Kirk visited the University of Regina in late August 2014 and interviewed groups of stakeholders representing researchers, institute/centre leaders/researchers, VP Research, VP Admin, University Governance, Research Administration and Compliance etc. The purpose of the interviews was to learn what problems and issues existed at the U of R in relation to establishment, operation and reviewing of centres and institutes (C/Is).

A further study of peer university institute / centre policies and interviews with key personnel (involved in centres/institutes) provided critical information on best practices.

Fact Finding/Interview Phase (8.1.2)

Interviews with 11 individuals /groups at the U of R revealed that there are issues and obstacles that prevent C/Is from reaching their full potential during their life cycle. The following are issues that were raised by the interviewees:

Alignment – There is a sense that most new C/Is that are created are organic, grass roots grown and that there needs to be better alignment between the U of R research strategy and the research areas represented by newly created C/Is.

Recommendation: Alignment with Institutional and Faculty research strategies, plans and priorities could be a criterion of the establishment procedure. However there should be a well understood mechanism for a grass roots derived research area to find its way into the strategic plan and Institutional and Faculty research strategies.

Governance Issues – C/Is are established under the authority of the Board of Governors and Senate. The role of senate particularly, is seen as problematic in that there seems to be a question as to the level of involvement (of senate) required especially during establishment of C/Is.

Recommendation: The role of senate in the establishment and ongoing review of C/Is needs to be studied and clarified.

Resources – There is a pervasive sense that there needs to be a stronger institutional commitment to supporting new C/Is (aligning with institutional priority/strategy) and that relying on small pots of diminishing overheads does not allow the VPR to adequately support new C/Is.

Recommendation: Dedicated and ongoing funding should be secured to enable appropriate support for the creation, maintenance and review of C/Is at the U of R.

Transparency – There is a sense that a lack of fairness and transparency taint the current C/I establishment process especially relating to financial support from the VPR. Many in the Faculties don't understand the C/I establishment process or what is required to be successful in securing institutional financial support.

Recommendation: The institution dedicate ongoing resources to C/I creation, revise the policy for creation of C/Is and create a robust establishment process (that engages appropriate stakeholders i.e. proponents, faculty, VP Research, VP Admin etc.) that accurately assesses the potential research excellence/impact, performance metrics, financial sustainability, risk to the institution, leadership/management structure of a proposed C/I.

Reports and Reviews – There is a comprehensive view that the reporting and reviewing processes are less than optimal and that C/I proponents and directors often don't know what is required to be included in their reports.

Recommendation: Annual reviews should be consistently required as well as 3-5 year reviews. The review process should be well communicated and annual report /review report templates should be created to assist C/I directors. Reports and Reviews should be reviewed/assessed by appropriately expert C/I review panel members.

Leadership Incentive – There is a sense that although C/Is may be very good for the U of R there is insufficient incentive or reward for top researchers to take on leadership roles since there may not be teaching release or a stipend attached to a C/I leadership role. Given the demanding nature of these roles there needs to be an accommodation for time and energy needed to lead a C/I.

Recommendation: The VPR secure dedicated funding to support C/Is and determine the best mechanisms (stipend/course release/admin support etc.) for attracting and retaining the best researchers to lead C/Is.

Risk – There is lack of engagement/oversight of non-research executive leaders (VP Admin, Risk Management, Governance) in how the C/Is are established, operate and a lack of understanding of the risk that they present to the institution.

Recommendation: The appropriate non-research stakeholders (along with research stakeholders) should additionally be involved in the revision of the C/I policy, assessment of establishment proposals (for the larger, more complex C/Is) and should receive annual reports and be involved in the 3-5 year review process (again for the larger, more complex C/Is)

Communication – There is a strongly held belief that the C/Is and the U of R do a less than ideal job of communicating their benefit and impact (internally and externally) of research C/Is.

Recommendation: An institutional C/I communications plan should be created in collaboration with C/I directors/communications staff, Faculty/VPR communication and institutional public relations staff.

Type I vs type II – The U of R policy makes a distinction between Type I and II C/Is according to the degree of interdisciplinarity. There is a strong feeling that other criteria need to come into play and that a C/I of a certain size/budget (>\$1M/year budget with complex legal contracts with industry) might justify a traditionally Faculty based, Type II C/I actually be supported, managed and reviewed similar to a Type I because of the additional risk (financial, legal and reputational) to the institution. Another such criterion might be international collaborations which again add cost and risk to the equation.

Recommendation: The VPR consult with C/I directors, Deans, Finance/Admin, Governance/Risk Management and Legal at U of R to re-evaluate the criteria for support and review processes for Type I and II C/Is and discuss scale/risk and other additional criteria.

Impact Metrics – There is a strong feeling that there is inadequate definition of success i.e. metrics used to monitor and guide the operations of C/Is.

Recommendation: Implement a well understood and agreed upon system of key performance indicators (quantitative and qualitative) that are used to assess the success of a C/I on a regular basis. These success metrics might be negotiated before establishment authority is confirmed but would be flexible and could be renegotiated upon review and agreement with the Dean or VPR as appropriate.

Systems and Tools – There is a strong sense that extracting and collating the appropriate performance data is time and energy consuming and that in order to implement a fairer and more transparent system of assessment there is a need to have access to appropriate tools and systems. U of R subscribes to InCites which provides access to publication and citation metrics but does not have a system that collates research performance at the individual PI, dept, Faculty level.

Recommendation: VPR evaluate various tools and system options to enable better evaluation and tracking of research outputs/impact metrics. The systems that manage research performance data are: Thomson Reuters Converis, Elsevier Pure, Proximify and Symplectic.

Peer Institutions and Best Practice – (8.1.5)

A detailed study of peer institution C/I policies and procedures revealed that the trend towards team based research has caused an increase in C/I creation and the pressure to support start-up and sustainment funding is ever increasing.

C/I Funding - Few institutions have dedicated funds set aside for support of new I/Cs. Most institutions derive the support from VP Research discretionary funding, from indirect cost of research funding or other funds with multiple calls on their use. Discussion with peers suggests that **best practice** would involve the dedication of a fund managed by the VP Research to support creation, sustainment and review of I/Cs.

Type I vs Type 2 C/Is. Most institutions make a distinction between C/Is with researchers from one Faculty vs a C/I with researchers from multiple Faculties. At most institutions the single Faculty I/C reports to a Dean and the multi-Faculty C/I reports to the VP Research. **Best practice** appears to be a clear distinction between single Faculty and multi-Faculty C/Is reporting respectively to a Dean or VPR. However some institutions have recognized the need for some large scale, single faculty (high risk) C/Is to have enhanced support, management, review processes in place to address additional risk. Some peer universities reserve the term “Institute” for a VPR led Type I C/I and the term “Centre” for a type II C/I.

Management of C/Is – Few institutions report they do a good job of management and review of C/Is even though they agree on their importance and risk attached to their operation. Some institutions assign a AVP Research to the role of managing and reviewing (or at least organizing reviews).

Best practice appears to be where the task of managing C/Is is assigned to a person from among the VPR group with the skill and time to institute appropriate processes to ensure the successful management of the C/I portfolio. Utilization of an appropriate panel (internal/external) to assist the VPR/Dean in assessment of the C/Is appears to improve the process.

Reporting and Reviewing of C/Is – Most institutions report less than ideal reporting and reviewing of C/Is. Lack of time, attention, lack of metrics/tools/systems and funding appears to be the oft quoted reasons for poor reporting and reviewing of C/Is. **Best practice** appears to be an annual reporting from the C/I along the guidelines provided by a template report from the VPR office. Reviews are carried out on a 3-5 year timescale with appropriate composition of review panels i.e. expert and objective. An external component helps ensure objectivity.

Development of a Revised C/I Policy (8.1.1)

The process to implement a new, improved C/I policy is already well under way. Various steps have been taken. A comprehensive internal study commissioned by the VPR illustrated the key issues. This report provides an external view on how the policy and processes might be re-shaped to best support centres and institutes at the U of R.

The key stakeholders that need to be consulted include: Top researchers, C/I Directors, Deans, Senate and Governance administration, Risk Management, VP Admin, ILO/ORS.

Recommendation: A revised C/I policy be developed with appropriate consultation

A robust process to revise the policy might involve:

1. Internal review and report 1 (already completed)
2. External review and report 2 (this report)
3. Development of straw man revised policy based on recommendations in reports 1+2.
4. Consultation with stakeholders (A)
5. Re-write of policy – wide communication of the straw man policy
6. Consultation with stakeholders (B) – wide engagement of the broad research community
7. Final policy re-write
8. Executive and Senate/BoG approval of the new policy

Development of a Revised Establishment Process

Deployment of a successful C/I policy requires an effective establishment procedure. Potential applicants who wish to create an institutes/centres expect a fair, supportive, transparent process for adjudication of establishment proposals. From the institutional perspective it is important that the decision to create a C/I is based on evidence of research excellence, a top quality research plan, quality leadership and a robust, sustainable business plan.

Recommendation: Create a robust establishment policy and process. Assessment of the applications for establishment of a new C/I should engage a panel of experts to assist the VPR/ Dean in the establishment decision. The panel should involve key Deans/Associate Deans research (type I), VP admin or their designate to provide a business/financial assessment, and representatives of the broad research faculty. Since the C/I is created under the authority of the senate it may be beneficial to include a member of Senate in the panel.

It is evident that establishment of new C/I is a tremendous opportunity for growing the research reputation of the U of R but at the same time attracts new risks for the academy. Institutional support,

especially financial, is critical to the successful creation of C/Is. Most C/Is will only require institutional start-up funding for 2-3 years until they become self-sustaining. However some C/Is will not have funding/matching opportunities and may require ongoing funding.

Robust and regular reporting and reviews are needed to ensure high quality C/Is are adequately supported and that outputs and impact are appropriately high quality.

Recommendation:

1. A template for the establishment proposal should be developed (see 8.1.4).
2. An annual report should be required from C/I directors following a template (see 8.1.4).
3. A thorough review should be carried out every 3-5 years again following a template (8.1.4).
4. A C/I assessment panel should be created with appropriate representation (composition discussed in 8.1.4) to assist the VPR/Deans in making C/I establishment decisions, reviewing annual reports and carrying out 3-5 year reviews.

Defining Success (Templates) – (8.1.4)

A successful policy and process for establishment and maintenance of C/Is requires leadership (a person whose role it is to manage the process of C/I establishment and review) and robust reporting and review. A robust establishment process, a regular annual report (reviewed by the right people who can add value to the process: Research leadership, Financial/Admin leadership, Risk Management etc). This process is greatly improved when C/I directors know what is expected of them at every stage of the C/I lifecycle.

Having templates for establishment proposals, annual reports and 3-5 year review reports greatly assists the process. The following is a synthesis from peer consultation and analyses of policies on what the various templates should include.

Establishment Document:

1. Research plan - Detailed research plan that lays the research goals of the proposed C/I and who is likely to be involved (established researchers, graduate students, post-docs, new faculty etc.)
2. Impact (potential) statement – A clear description of what the research undertaken by the centre/institute could accomplish
3. Management plan - Detailed management plan (identifying C/I leader or process to hire leader) with organizational chart
4. Funding plan and budget - The C/I should have a sufficiently credible funding plan that will allow the C/I to be sustainable in the mid-term (3-5 years)
5. Metrics – A collation (scorecard) of qualitative and quantitative measures appropriate to measure outputs/impact of the centre/institute. These KPIs should be negotiated and agreed with the Dean/VPR prior to establishment approval.
6. Faculty support - C/I should have detailed (approved and confirmed) commitment of support i.e. space, financial support of Faculties involved.
7. Partner Plan - If the C/I is in a research area with industry players, government/NGOs, the C/I should have appropriate (confirmed) partnership in place.
8. Communications - The C/I should have a credible communications and knowledge mobilization/commercialization plan.

Annual Reports:

1. A progress/impact statement from the director detailing societal impact, research funding secured, key events, partnership activities, publications, conferences, network meetings that have been enabled by the C/I and those anticipated/planned in the upcoming 3 years.

2. A financial statement that details the past years spend (threshold TBA), committed funds and unspent funds.
3. Updated org chart/management plan that identifies all faculty and staff involved in the C/I
4. A budget plan for next 3 years detailing sources of funding both secured and expected.
5. Report on progress against agreed metrics for C/I.

The 3-5 year Review should be ideally carried out by a panel chaired by the Dean or VPR (depending on type of C/I) involving the appropriate stakeholders. In judging the quality of the research impact it is critical that there are expert and objective panel members. In an ideal situation an external academic in the particular expertise area would be a panel member. The review process would begin with submission of a report to the Dean/VPR by the C/I director. The process proceeds with a verification stage where the outputs of the C/I are verified. The process is concluded with an interview of the C/I leader, lead administrator and a selection of key internal and external (if there are any) researchers involved in the C/I.

Possible Review Process:

1. Notification sent to C/I director advising of impending review
2. Submission of Review report by C/I director (within 3 months of notice of review)
3. Verification of report data (provided by C/I) e.g. funding and publications etc.
4. Interview of C/I director, lead administrator etc. with review panel
5. Meeting of the panel to discuss findings and recommendation to VPR/Dean and then to senate
6. Confirmation of extended mandate sent to C/I Director

The 3-5 year review report should include:

- Research Excellence – output/impact – Has the C/delivered excellent research impact in the form of publications, conferences, knowledge mobilization, highly qualified personnel etc.?
- Resources: Does the C/I have appropriate resources to sustain operations for the next 3-5 year period?
- Leadership – Does the current leadership of the C/I provide effective leadership of the C/I?
- Communication – Has the C/I adequately communicated/mobilized the research to the outside world beyond publication in scholarly journals?

If the answer to all of the above is yes then the C/I review panel will advise the VPR or Dean that the C/I be renewed for a further mandate of 3-5 years (annual reports and review finding reports being sent to all Deans/Department Heads involved, The VP Admin, ED Governance, ORS etc).

The review process is most likely concluded with a confirmation of extended mandate to both the C/I and the senate if appropriate.

Should the C/I not meet the threshold performance then the panel may recommend that the C/I be placed on probation (with recommendations to improve) with a new review on a 1-2 year timescale or directed to cease operations and disband.

Criteria for Attracting Institutional Support (8.1.3)

Supporting C/Is during their start-up phase and beyond is critical to their long term success. At the same time having appropriate criteria to inform the decision to provide institutional support is critical, in a time when limited resources are available and difficult allocation decisions are being made.

The following are criteria that should be considered in making the decision to support (centrally) a C/I:

- High quality research plan – Does the C/I have the appropriate high quality research plan that lays out the broad research strategies?
- Highly Qualified Personnel – Does the C/I have sufficient planning around engagement of new faculty, post-docs, graduate students and production of highly qualified personnel?
- Leadership – Does the academic leader of the proposed centre/institute have a demonstrated track record of leadership e.g. evidence and track record of leadership of research networks, collaborations, leading multi-party grant applications etc.?
- Alignment – Is the proposed C/I in alignment with the institutional and Faculty research strategies?
- Researchers – Are the researchers who are named as members of the proposed centre/Institute of sufficient quality and critical mass they will be successful ...do they have a track record of working together/co-publication etc. high citation impact, co-publication and H-indices?
- Success Metrics – Has the proposed C/I defined appropriate metrics that allow the U of R to monitor and assess progress?
- Administrative Plan – Does the C/I have a robust management plan with appropriate management/governance/administrative support described?
- Funding – Does the proposed C/I have sufficient secured funding to get off the ground? Is there sufficient leverage of institutional funds?
- Development and Alumni - Is there appropriate engagement of the Development group and Alumni in the funding plan?
- Faculty support - Does the C/I have the appropriate support (space, financial support) of Faculties involved?
- Sustainability - Does the C/I have a sufficiently credible budget and funding plan that will allow the C/I to be sustainable in the mid-term (3-5 years)?
- Partner Support – If the C/I is in a research area with potential industry, government or NGO partners; has the C/I created appropriate partnership, attracted matching funding, involved partner in planning and governance/advisory?
- Knowledge Mobilization – Does the C/I have a credible Knowledge Mobilization plan?