What is Institutional Research?

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Introduction

Although its roots can be traced back further, institutional research grew up in the 1950s in American higher education. Outside the United States of America (USA), only higher education institutions in Canada have developed institutional research (IR) as a field of practice and profession. Even though it is very likely that institutional research-like activities can be found in every higher education system, IR has yet to be developed as a clearly recognisable, separate administrative and research function outside North America.

For a number of reasons since the end of the 1970s the interest in IR has grown in many European countries, in Australasia and in New Zealand. A European branch of the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) was established in 1979 and it became independent in 1989. A year later, the birth of an Australasian branch of AIR also took place.

This article focuses on the definition of IR and its historical development as an expanding field in tertiary education planning and management.

Institutional Research: A Definition

The discussion of IR in this paper is largely based on the USA and Canadian experiences, since these two countries have a longer history of IR tradition. Furthermore, most of the IR literature relates to these two countries.

There are various ways of defining IR. Peterson (1985) defines IR as ‘a critical intermediary function that links the educational, managerial, and information functions of higher education institutions and systems’. This definition is based on an analysis of the way in which IR has developed since the 1960s. In practice, IR is primarily identified with one of the three functions that Peterson had identified.

Fincher (1985) describes IR as ‘the analysis and interpretation of institutional records and data, plus the occasional or periodic studies that are necessary to supplement routine record keeping and reporting’. According to Fincher, IR should be primarily policy-oriented and able to explain the behaviour of institutions in theoretical terms. He was critical that institutional researchers still confine themselves to analysing and interpreting specific events and processes within their own institutions.

In an often cited definition, Saupe (1981) emphasises the functional aspect of IR, that is, IR is for supporting institutional management. This support is in the form of providing information which can be used in institutional planning, policy formulation, and decision making. Like Fincher, Saupe distinguishes IR from (scientific) higher education research. This distinction is in response to Dyer’s question of whether IR can lead to a science of institutions. Basically the scope of IR is restricted to the boundaries of an institution’s operation. Higher education research, on the other hand, has as its purpose the expansion of knowledge about higher education in general.

When a higher education institution grows in size or complexity, the need for IR will grow since a variety of information is needed for institutional planning and decision making. Altbach and Kelly (1985) describe IR in this context as ‘research conducted within a higher education institution for the purpose of collecting and analysing data concerning the programs and activities of the institution’. Sheehan (1980) provides a similar definition. He views IR as the ‘study and analysis of the operations, environment, and process of higher education institutions for the purpose of supplying information for decisions in higher education’.
Corson (1978), however, argues that IR should be a general function within higher education institutions. It should study the educational effectiveness as well as the efficiency of institutional management. In the real world, IR is more applied to specific problems such as student studies, faculty studies, curricula studies, operational studies and financial studies.

Although there are as many definitions for IR as there are institutional researchers, Maassen (1986) has characterised IR as containing several basic supportive activities. These are:

- collecting data on institutional performance,
- collecting data on the institutional environment,
- analysing and interpreting the data collected, and
- transforming the results of the data into information for decision support in planning and management.

Based on these activities, IR can be operationally defined as implementing specific management support activities in an institution or group of institutions.

**The Growing Interest in Institutional Research**

According to our discussion of IR definitions, IR is basically management supportive and institutionally oriented. It establishes an intra-institutional link between the central institutional decision makers and the departments as well as inter-institutional link between the institution and the, external environment. IR also provides information on the performance of an institution and its environment.

Information on institutional performance is critical to an institution’s survival in an environment increasingly faced with resource scarcity and stiff competition. An institution’s viability, therefore, depends on its ability to acquire resources from the environment and use them efficiently at a sustainable level.

Accountability is an important factor determining an institution’s ability to meet the requirements of the environment. In a stable environment where the supply of resources is relatively unrestricted, institutions may not have to invest heavily on dealing with the external requirements. This situation was applicable to the environment of most public higher education institutions in Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand in the late 1960s.

Since then, the issue of accountability is of growing importance. Students as well as governments and other constituents have become more interested in the performance of these institutions. For example, in a number of the countries mentioned above, governments have based funding decisions increasingly on institutional performance. As a consequence, principal decision makers became interested in IR-based activities which provide more objective and systematic approaches to institutional evaluation. Hitherto, such activities were often carried out by individual sections of the institutions and administrative departments and were often unstructured and uncoordinated.

Another reason for the unstructured manner in which IR-based activities were conducted is related to the way authority is distributed in the higher education system in question. Contrary to the situation in the USA, in Europe and Australasia, most of the power is concentrated at the governmental and departmental level. The central institutional level is relatively weak. It also has a relatively limited budget for staff support. It is difficult, therefore, to set up new offices without taking away some of the resources from the other offices. In some European countries, the organisational structure of higher education institutions is determined by law and it does not cover an IR office.

In the next section, the history of IR in Australia will be discussed.

**IR in Australia**

Following the Martin Report (1964-65) and the evolution of the College of Advanced Education sector, and the switch in financial responsibility for higher education from the States to the Federal Government in
Australia in the early seventies, the Australian Government sought accountability in the form of student, staffing and financial statistical information from institutions. In order to organise the provision of this information, many colleges and universities established a Statistics Officer position at lower to middle level of administration. Some institutions continued to devolve this task to the relevant areas concerned. For example, Student Administration from the Registry would provide student statistics whereas the Personnel Section would provide staffing statistics. So in the Australian region, IR has had its origins in the field of educational statistics. At this time, Wark (1969) expressed concern about the effectiveness of college planning and the lack of professional planners; indeed senior teaching staff had to undertake this work to the detriment of course development and teaching quality.

Progressively during the 1970s, the Federal Government, through agencies such as the now defunct Commission on Advanced Education, introduced the concept of triennial planning. This required the preparation of enrolment projections, the need to estimate resource requirements and the like. Many of the Statistics Officers began to be involved in such areas as enrolment projections, estimate of future academic staff needs, building space planning and so on. Through such a process there evolved the need to establish positions for Planning Officers in Australian higher education institutions. In this way institutional planning was added to the provision of statistical information to describe what was IR at that time.

During the early 1980s, some institutions broadened institutional planning to include strategic or corporate planning as well. But even as late as 1987, the Australian Minister of Education emphasised the need for higher education management to effect greater focus on strategic planning and evaluation of performance of institutions (Dawkins, 1987).

The next phase in the development of IR in Australia was the increasing recognition of the importance of research on the management of higher education. Statistics Officers were involved in this area as is evidenced by the DOCIT research group which examined cost analysis of the central institutes of technology. However, this function was not widespread during the early seventies. IR gained prominence in the eighties because of the increasing attention paid by the Federal Government to such issues as access and equity in higher education.

Institutions themselves began to see more value in obtaining a greater understanding of how institutions function, the socio-economic background and performance of students, the determinants of student performance and the like. Further with the tightening of financial conditions by the Federal Government authorities, only those institutions which could carefully articulate their case and present empirical evidence for their claims were proving to be successful in obtaining additional federal funding for new initiatives. This development has reached the stage whereby some institutions, such as Curtin University of Technology, have established an Office of Institutional Research.

**Conclusion**

This article has examined the multi-faceted definition and development of IR in the US, Canada, Europe and Australia. As indicated in the paper, IR in North America and Europe has acquired a specialty focus on the management of higher education and policy analysis. In the case of Australia, IR, to a large extent, is still confined to the humble area of statistical collection relating to student, staff and budgetary profiles and the preparation of bulletins such as the Statistics Booklet. Over time and with Federal Government pressures, the functions undertaken by Statistics Officers were extended to include quantitative planning, corporate planning and research into the management of higher education and the undertaking of policy analysis. IR in Australia, therefore, has some dimensions not ascribed to the term as used in many other countries.

The basic reason for broadening the meaning of IR in Australia is that many Australian institutions (until the very recent round of amalgamations encouraged by the funding bodies) were small by international standards (certainly by American standards). Indeed many of the regional institutions have campuses of two to three thousand equivalent full-time students. Thus specialisation of functions is not possible in the context of many Australian higher education institutions. Still many Australian institutional researchers
have been expected to undertake wide functions and duties and they have found such a diverse role stimulating and interesting in the current dynamic environment of institutional restructuring.

**References**


**Acknowledgment**

The authors wish to acknowledge the comments received on the paper from Dr Ng Gan Che and Mr Bruce Zimmer.