

Active transformations: Processes of designing and leading new international research centres.

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I am honoured and proud to be there today, not only because it manifests the path done by a very dear colleague, Sally Randles, but because it is also I hope a turning point in the construction of a new collective capability articulating sustainable development and innovation.

Let me start by an image: Research centres are like new firms. There needs to be initial promoters. Most of the times, there is a long incubating time before the centre as such emerges and experiments. And there are often go and fro before a good business model is identified and put in place, so that the centre is institutionalised and becomes lasting.

But the process is often far more difficult because we miss most of the supporting structures that now help start-up firms to be created and to mature: there are no incubators, no 'business angels', rare 'external' investors that share risks over a long period of time, and even worse no clear markers of success or failures.

Like new firms creating a centre is thus an attempt and not all attempts succeed, even if we should remember some very basic common sayings, (we say 'lapalissades' in French): if you do not try, there is no chance that you ever win. One of my French colleagues added when I was discussing the limited success of my before last attempt that in any case I learnt, so that I was more ready for the next one, which is in fact what happened.

To introduce you to my 8 dimensions to consider in the dynamics of a centre let me be selfish and use my own experience.

Just to give you an idea of timeframes: we were 2 senior researchers +2 PhD in 2002, embedded in a large urban lab and we are now, 15 years later, a 100 person lab which I think is quite visible internationally. This was thus a very long process: we became a full team within this urban lab in 2005 but were unable to become a centre per se (this is what I qualified as a part failure) even if we became the coordinators of the European network of excellence in our field, PRIME. It is only when we were selected in the national competition of 'labs of excellence' in 2010 that we entered an autonomisation process. But it took another 5 years to be fully institutionalised in the French landscape, becoming a joint mixed research unit (UMR) with INRA and CNRS.

What are the lessons I derive from this experience (and the extensive study of lab dynamics, one of my core research topics over the last 20 years).

a) **Timeframes** are very long. I often say to colleagues that wish to enter this process that it is a decade long. The implication is that if you do it alone you have all chances to be exhausted before the end of the process, or become no longer adapted to the stage you enter in. Thus it needs to be a collective adventure, even at the level of **leadership**, with the possibility of replacement. In fact, since the beginning of the story we have been 3 in charge successively, and next year a fourth one will be in charge!

b) You do not simply create by adding young staff, but by **attracting senior staff** that can enlarge the ability of the centre to train and the thematic coverage of the hot issues associated with the object of the centre.

For us, in the French environment linking with public research institutes proved crucial. But if we had not created dedicated innovation courses in engineering schools, we would not have been able to get new university positions. And we have been weak in creating a visible master course... and this is the core of our effort nowadays. My view is that this has two implications in the British landscape.

- To be lasting, a centre must not develop in isolation; it has to generate links with other centres in the same university that, in other disciplines and other faculties, focus on similar issues. Joint research projects are useful but not lasting. **Shared Teaching with and in other disciplinary settings** inscribes linkages on a longer timeframe and often provides a good starting point for lasting interactions.

- A good centre needs to be associated with a **strong master programme** covering a similar thematic. And this requires today to think differently as in earlier times: how to identify the specific competences students will acquire, how to bridge a variety of learning approaches. You will already see that these are questions of interest for SEEG in the sessions of this afternoon.

c) Without a strong doctoral programme that becomes attractive, it is difficult to root a centre in its field. What helped us a lot in this adventure was the creation with our European colleagues of an 'international scientific association' that offered summer schools, PhD conferences and the possibility of circulating PhDs between centres. Sally knows all about this with both our joint experience at MIOR and with the SCI trans-disciplinary programme that won a national award.

d) Most senior researchers come with their own programme, thus there is a clear danger of a centre becoming an 'hotel for academics' that share little in common. Variety, as the one you will see this afternoon, is both strength and a weakness. For us, **shared projects** were a key dimension not only to gain further financial resource (and with it, post-docs) but also to push for collective work, to concretely share approaches, and to progressively develop a **shared agenda**: no centre can cover the whole of the research agenda in its disciplinary or field environment. And it will gain recognition in the topics it engages into through the quality of its papers, but also and importantly if it has a critical mass of researchers that can engage in collaborative projects on this topic (EC projects are often important here) and if it has resources to engage with socio-economic actors, on 'problem-based' actions.

e) **Relations with external actors** played for us a critical role. Of course, there is the utilitarian view of adding resources. But what was more important and lasting, were what our evaluation colleagues call the 'productive interactions' we engaged into. We shared with colleagues in projects (with sometimes marginal returns compared to the cost of participation) about our approaches and even more, following Pickstone, our "ways of doing research". We shared with stakeholders the type of problems they face and the ability, to dig, beyond consultancy and service, the core research issues that lied behind the initial questions they raised. Here we should be attentive not to restrict the sphere of actors we work with. Colleagues in sustainable development know this. But this applies more widely. Yes we worked with very large firms and in a way most of the quantitative work we do today come from these relations (I am the coordinator of a European research infrastructure on data for science and innovation studies). Our connections with policymakers have been very important and in great part focused on their evaluation needs (in particular around the tricky question of impact assessment). But we have also had very rich exchanges with cities and

regions about their engagement in higher education and research, or about their innovation strategies; and I must say that I faced once again what happened in our field for collaborative research programmes: their ability to innovate before any academic work had taken place! And the work done with civil society organisations (in particular for orphan diseases) has been critical to the new developments we have made about participatory research.

I am not fond of all this jargon on co-creation, I prefer to remain modest and one reason to engage with actors, as Michel Callon beautifully said it, is to learn from the inventiveness of actors in the real world as, in a symmetric way, our analyses can help them become more reflexive about their own actions.

A long development to highlight the fact that the choice of the external actors a centre works with, has a strong impact on its trajectory and thus that this choice is 'political' or 'strategic' and cannot be only utilitarian. 'Tell me who you work with, and I shall tell you who you are'.

To conclude, timeframe, leadership team, attractiveness for external senior researchers, the importance of both a strong master programme and a well-structured PhD programme, ability to share cross disciplines and the role of teaching in this, shared projects to drive progressively to a shared agenda, the strategic role of external partnerships in society, these are the 8 points I consider critical for building a new centre credible at the international level.