

Editorial. Organising Research in Teaching Intensive Higher Education: The Establishment of the Centre for Learning Innovation and Research (CLIR)

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Abstract

This editorial examines the organisation of research within teaching intensive higher education through the establishment of the Centre for Learning Innovation and Research at London Churchill College. Research activity in teaching-oriented institutions often develops through individual academic initiative rather than coordinated institutional structures. The creation of a research centre introduces organisational consolidation through central recording of research outputs, formal ethical governance and collaborative publication planning. These mechanisms convert dispersed scholarly activity into recognised institutional research practice while preserving the primary educational mission of a teaching focused provider. The research programme associated with the Centre addresses mature learner participation; vocational education connected with healthcare workforce preparation; institutional questions concerning academic engagement with research. By reflecting upon this experience the editorial contributes to wider discussion concerning the relationship between teaching and research in higher education and demonstrates how scholarly inquiry may be sustained within institutions whose central purpose lies in teaching.

Keywords

Research organisation; Teaching intensive higher education; Research governance; Independent higher education; Academic practice; Widening participation

All human beings by nature desire to know. A sign of this is the pleasure taken in the senses for even apart from their usefulness they are valued for themselves.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 980a21–24

Aristotle opens the *Metaphysics* with an observation that remains instructive for the intellectual purposes of higher education. Human beings possess an innate desire to know and the search for understanding arises not merely from practical necessity but from a deeper inclination toward inquiry and reflection. Institutions devoted to learning exist because this impulse requires organisation if it is to develop into disciplined scholarship rather than remain an expression of curiosity alone. Universities and colleges therefore create the conditions through which intellectual work may be sustained across time. Teaching introduces students to established bodies of knowledge and traditions of thought while research subjects inherit assumptions to critical examination and produces new understanding through systematic investigation. The relationship between these activities has long been recognised as central to academic life because it allows knowledge to be transmitted, questioned and extended across generations. This relationship has also been re-examined in relation to inquiry-based teaching, where research activity informs and enriches student learning within higher education (Brew, 2012). Yet the ways in which institutions organise this relationship vary considerably. In environments where teaching constitutes the principal professional

responsibility the cultivation of research requires deliberate institutional attention if scholarly activity is to develop alongside the substantial commitments associated with programme delivery and student support.

Teaching intensive institutions operate under conditions that differ markedly from those associated with research universities whose organisational structures are built around large research programmes and doctoral education. Within teaching-oriented providers the academic calendar is shaped primarily by curriculum delivery, assessment processes and the ongoing support of diverse student communities. Academic staff frequently combine responsibilities that include teaching, academic advising, programme leadership and regulatory compliance, each of which demands sustained attention throughout the academic year (Ylijoki, Kallio and Ursin, 2023). The increasing administrative burden associated with contemporary higher education further constrains the capacity of academic staff to sustain research activity alongside teaching responsibilities (Woelert, 2023). These conditions do not diminish the intellectual importance of research; yet they influence how scholarly work emerges within institutional life. In teaching intensive environments scholarly inquiry frequently develops through reflection upon classroom practice, programme design and professional engagement with external partners. These forms of inquiry may not always appear immediately as formal research projects; yet they constitute important intellectual activity that can generate publishable scholarship when supported through appropriate institutional structures. Recognition of this relationship between teaching practice and research activity therefore becomes essential for institutions seeking to sustain academic inquiry while maintaining a strong educational focus. Studies of academic practice have shown that research participation is closely connected with institutional recognition and professional identity because staff engagement increases when scholarly work is acknowledged as a legitimate dimension of academic labour rather than an activity undertaken in addition to formal responsibilities (Brew, 2012; Billot, 2010). When institutions lack structures that recognise research contributions, the cumulative intellectual work of academic staff may remain scattered across individual initiatives rather than forming a coherent body of scholarship. The question confronting many teaching intensive providers therefore concerns how research can be organised so that it becomes visible, supported and sustainable within an environment where teaching remains the dominant professional commitment.

The establishment of the Centre for Learning Innovation and Research (CLIR) at London Churchill College (LCC) offers one example of how a teaching intensive independent provider may address this organisational challenge. The significance of the Centre lies therefore in organisational consolidation rather than expansion (Kosmützky, 2026). Rather than attempting to emulate the research scale associated with large universities, the College has chosen to consolidate existing scholarly activity within a clearly defined institutional structure. The Centre brings together publication planning, ethical review and collaborative academic writing within a single organisational setting that records research outputs and encourages collective discussion of scholarly work. Through this arrangement, research becomes a recognised component of institutional life rather than an informal activity undertaken independently by individual lecturers. By providing a focal point for research activity the institution enables academic staff to situate their work within a shared intellectual endeavour while maintaining the central educational mission of a teaching focused provider.

Prior to the establishment of CLIR members of the academic staff had already produced peer reviewed work connected with questions arising from programme delivery and professional education. These publications addressed themes that included adult learner participation, pedagogic practice and vocational pathways into healthcare professions. Although these studies demonstrated serious engagement with higher education research, they emerged largely through individual initiatives, rather than through coordinated institutional planning. Articles and conference presentations appeared intermittently across programme areas, and the absence of central reporting meant that the cumulative scholarly activity of the academic community was not easily identifiable within institutional documentation. This situation was not unusual within teaching intensive institutions where research activity often developed through personal academic interest, rather than through structured research units.

The establishment of CLIR introduces procedures through which publications, research projects and conference participation can be documented and discussed collectively. Recording scholarly work in this manner ensures that academic contributions become part of institutional memory and encourages continuity in research engagement across successive academic years.

The research programme associated with the Centre illustrates how scholarly inquiry within teaching-oriented institutions frequently emerges from sustained reflection upon educational practice. One strand of research focuses upon the experiences of mature learners whose participation in higher education often follows periods of employment, caring responsibility or earlier interruption in formal education. These students bring diverse forms of professional and personal experience into the classroom; yet they may also encounter challenges associated with returning to academic study after long intervals. Research in this area examines questions of persistence, identity formation and academic confidence among adult learners and contributes to wider discussions concerning widening participation and social mobility in higher education (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2020). A second strand of inquiry addresses vocational education linked with healthcare workforce preparation including programmes designed to support entry into National Health Service roles between Band 2 and Band 4. These studies consider how curriculum design, professional placement and institutional support contribute to employment readiness within healthcare professions where workforce demand remains significant. A third strand examines institutional organisation through investigation of academic engagement with research activity, leadership transition from teaching roles into management positions and patterns of representation within the academic workforce. Current work on institutional guidance concerning generative artificial intelligence further shows that questions of research, teaching and administration are increasingly governed through formal policy development across higher education (An, Yu and James, 2025).

Together these areas demonstrate how applied higher education research may arise from institutional practice while also contributing to broader scholarly debates. Research emerging from teaching intensive institutions frequently combines empirical observation with reflective analysis of educational practice. Studies addressing mature learner participation provide insight into how adult students negotiate academic identity while balancing employment and family responsibilities. Investigations of vocational education contribute to discussion concerning the relationship between higher education and professional workforce preparation. Institutional research examining leadership transition and academic engagement with research activity provides valuable evidence concerning the organisation of academic labour

within contemporary higher education. Through these inquiries the research programme associated with the Centre contributes both to institutional improvement and to wider scholarly discussion of higher education practice.

Alongside the development of research themes, the Centre introduces formal ethical governance in order to ensure that scholarly work involving students, staff or professional partners is conducted according to recognised academic standards. Research that engages human participants requires careful attention to consent procedures, confidentiality and the responsible management of personal data. Contemporary higher education institutions therefore maintain research ethics committees that examine project proposals before empirical work begins. The establishment of a standing Research Ethics Committee within the Centre ensures that proposals are reviewed through documented procedures and that decisions are recorded within institutional governance systems. Ethical oversight not only protects research participants but also affirms the scholarly integrity of research conducted within the institution. By embedding ethical review within institutional practice, the College signals that research undertaken by its academic community meets the expectations associated with responsible scholarship and professional accountability.

The Centre also supports the organisation of scholarly writing through collective academic practice. Producing articles suitable for publication requires sustained engagement with literature, careful development of argument and willingness to revise work in response to editorial feedback. Within teaching intensive institutions academic staff frequently pursue writing alongside substantial teaching responsibilities, and opportunities for collaborative discussion may therefore be limited. Writing groups organised through the Centre provide a setting in which colleagues can exchange drafts, review each other's work and discuss appropriate journals for submission. These interactions encourage intellectual dialogue among staff whose disciplinary backgrounds may differ but research interests intersect through shared engagement with higher education practice. Through such collective efforts, the solitary labour of academic writing becomes part of a wider scholarly conversation that strengthens both the quality of research and the confidence of authors preparing work for publication.

The experience discussed here raises a broader question concerning how research may be sustained across diverse forms of higher education institutions. Policy discussions frequently focus upon universities whose reputations are built upon large research portfolios and doctoral training programmes. Recent work also indicates that higher education institutions are being reshaped by technological and pedagogic change in ways that heighten the importance of clear academic organisation and institutional purpose (Marshall *et al.*, 2024). Yet a substantial proportion of higher education provision occurs within institutions where teaching remains the primary institutional commitment. The continuing significance of higher education as a public good further reinforces the need to recognise diverse institutional contributions to knowledge production beyond research intensive universities (Marginson and Yang, 2025). The example of LCC demonstrates that research culture within these settings need not depend upon extensive funding or large disciplinary departments but upon organisational clarity and institutional recognition of scholarly work. When institutions acknowledge the scholarly dimensions of teaching practice and provide structures through which academic staff may develop research collaboratively, they create conditions in which inquiry becomes a shared institutional responsibility rather than an individual endeavour. When research activity is

recorded within governance structures, supported through collaborative writing practices and guided by established ethical procedures, it becomes part of the ordinary intellectual life of the institution. Through careful organisation and sustained academic commitment, even modest institutional settings may contribute meaningfully to the advancement of knowledge and ensure that the desire for understanding described by Aristotle continues to animate the intellectual purposes of higher education.

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