

Businesses and governments around the world are watching as China grows, innovates and extends its influence. We explore how the country got to where it is and what might be in store for its future in our series [Understanding China's Influence](#).

Centres at universities and research institutes focused on China have evolved over time to suit different purposes but in their present forms, these centres could sink as quickly as they surface. Without university funding these centres will need to be rescued by a generous donor with particular expectations, calling into question their independence.

China centres in Australia share a number of common features. For a start they are relatively new. All but one, ANU's Contemporary China Centre, were established over the past ten to fifteen years to meet opportunities and challenges thrown up over the period.

Based on my discussions with university board members, many of these specialist China centres were established as top-down initiatives by university executives eager to take advantage of the rising importance of China. These units attract government funds, business contributions and philanthropic donations.

In the case of the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and Western Sydney University, university executives negotiated with a private Chinese donor with close links to Beijing to [secure establishment grants for the two centres](#)

. Similarly, the Australian National University (ANU) Chancellery negotiated with Prime Minister Rudd for an unprecedented contribution of

[A\\$53 million to found the Centre for China in the World](#)

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To some extent the creation of China centres marks an effort to stem the decline in empirical research capacity.

How China centres formed

There is no handbook listing all of the centres and institutes operating in Australian universities, no guide, either, to classifying university centres by type or field of work. Some universities house dozens of centres, each working in a discrete field and some kinds of centres are replicated right across the university system while others are limited to a handful of universities.

To my knowledge, at least seven universities have specialist China centres. [Around twelve host Confucius Institutes](#) supported by the government of China to promote its cultural-political agendas on campus and more broadly in the community.

Cooky-cutter Confucius Institutes aside, Australia's China centres differ significantly in mission and scope. The centres at Sydney, Melbourne and La Trobe Universities are certainly similar in so far as they coordinate and highlight the work of their universities' dispersed China expertise. However each centre has a distinctive character reflecting the range of expertise available on campus.

Other centres serve more specialised functions, including the Chinese Commerce Research Centre at the University of Wollongong and the recently created [Australia-China Institute for Arts and Culture](#) at Western Sydney University. The [Australia China Relations Institute \(ACRI\)](#) at the UTS, positions itself as a contemporary think tank focusing on Australia-China relations.

Some universities house multiple China centres serving a variety of functions. The [ANU's China Institute](#) plays an inter-faculty co-ordinating role. Its [Contemporary China Centre](#) conducts high-impact research into Chinese society and politics and its [Centre for China in the World](#) aims to support the national effort in addition to advancing China research at the ANU.

Funding and influence

The first China centre to go under was the UTS China Research Centre. A generous Chinese donor stepped in and ACRI, a new centre with a very different mission, was erected on the ashes of the former centre. There is a risk that this could happen to other China centres.

In my opinion, without long-term faculty and university support China centres at the University of Sydney, Melbourne and La Trobe could be vulnerable to the cycle of unrealistic target-setting followed by donor rescue and mission drift.

External funding could also lead to institutional drift. ACRI for example positions itself as a think tank and [compares](#) its mission and sources of funding with those of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

This institute is a company limited by guarantee and managed by a board of directors appointed by government. It is not a university entity and owes no loyalty to the values of impartiality, freedom of thought and expression, excellence in research and education, and service to the community that characterise a good university.

It's these values that make universities more vulnerable to donor intervention than think tanks when accepting private, corporate, or government funds to support their China programs.

John Fitzgerald does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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