

Field Notes and Case Studies

Research Centres as Evidence-Providing Resources for Planners and Policy Makers

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Universities feature a mix of rigid structures and fluid relationships which can make accessing them and finding relevant research somewhat difficult for those in planning and policy roles. There have been many attempts to bridge those gaps, often through professional or disciplinary organisations and publications, like Planning Quarterly, Policy Quarterly and Impact Connector. Indeed, the Lincoln Planning Review is an attempt to provide a two-way bridge between academia and practitioner. These tend to be one-way delivery mechanisms and used by relatively few academics. University research centres may provide an alternative mechanism.

Research centres usually represent areas of internationally recognised research strength and capability and are used by universities to enhance recognition and the impact of those strengths in innovative research. This focus on research, however, raises questions as to their utility to address the more mundane research needs of planners and policy makers – practitioners who usually have to address problems as they arise based on existing knowledge and research rather than have the time to seek robustly researched evidence on which to base decisions. For planners, these are often place-based issues for which generalised models may be less important than local empirical evidence and data.

In this field note, I look at three of the 17 [research centres at Lincoln University](#). These three could be providing evidence to inform planners and related policy makers. Two of these centres, the Centre for Land Environment and People (LEaP) and the Waterways Centre, were established more than a decade ago. The other, the Sustainable Property Research Centre (SPRC) is very new. Each is quite different in character and activity.

This note is essentially a critical reflection, based on being a researching member of all three centres, but viewing them from my planning and policy analyst practitioner perspective. My intention is to draw these centres to the attention of planners and policy-makers and encourage them to consider how they might best utilise such centres, while at the same time taking a critical look at the nature of the centre activities and what they may need to do to be more relevant.

The Centre for Land Environment and People (LEaP)

Established in 2008, LEaP is hosted by Lincoln University's Faculty of Environment, Society and Design. Its website claims it is "an interdisciplinary hub for sharing high-quality Lincoln University research that relates to the wellbeing of the environment, society and its diverse cultures". It seeks to:

- Extend the collective impact of research by strengthening the interface between research and end-users, especially policy-makers and relevant industry
- Support and facilitate the critic and conscience role of the university by contributing to public debate through scholarly understanding, critique and creativity
- Promote stewardship of the environment, society and its diverse cultures.

The centre is therefore clearly of direct relevance to practitioners, being less focussed on generating research and more on being a resource and an interface.

It has eight research areas and publishes research reports. At times, the centre hosts research fellows and visitors. At the time of writing, it had produced 65 Research Reports, 30 Research Papers and 23 Miscellaneous Publications all [accessible through the Lincoln University Library's research archive](#). It has had several different Directors over the years and has not settled on a clear direction or strategy to achieve its aims.

While its research areas have linked particular researchers together, apart from the tourism industry, it has generally not actively sought to partner in external research fund-raising. This is partly because its intent has been more about facilitating getting information from research out to potential users than in seeking external funding to enable its research. Even in that sense it has been quite narrow. It has not hosted conferences or public seminars or established any advisory board of stakeholders from whom to seek advice. Instead, its reports and papers have been used as a means to disseminate data and analyses in a form useful to end users. Funding for the research may come through small research funds, such as summer scholarships provided by district or regional councils, or other sources, such as National Science Challenges.

The reports it produces could provide case study, place-specific material readily useable for planners and policy makers in a timely manner, rather than await publication two or three years later in one or more largely impenetrable, jargon-ridden international journal articles. However, this is not guaranteed and notably one report (Savage and Rennie, 2023) contains data collected in the 2020-2021 summer that was not published until 2023.

The Centre has proved useful as a permanent host for a series of annual reviews of a particular sector (e.g., tourism) for as long as the funding was available. That potentially could be utilised by councils and industries (e.g., the New Zealand Planning Institute) for annual independent monitoring reports of aspects of the social-ecological systems of a place or of a national industry.

The major weakness of LEaP is that it is not focussed on generating research funds to make it fully self-funding, therefore meaning that it may not be able to consistently deliver on its aims. It has no full-time academic staff, no administrative support staff and from reading its website some of its 'research areas' appear inactive. Notably, while some research areas clearly link to research associates' websites (and hence their research) or to research project outputs, most do not. There is no sense that the Centre adds to the international or indeed the national recognition or impact of the University. Nor does it support training programmes, research students or teach courses. Research outputs of associated staff are not directly connected to the 'research areas' on the site (the current website provides only a link to the named series of reports). This may be an accurate reflection of the Centre and its goals, but is quite different from the other two centres discussed here. Consequently, it may be vulnerable to being disestablished by the University.

To illustrate the nature of its key outputs, the following reports have been published by LEaP in the 2022-2024 period. The size of the reports is indicative of the amount of data that may be held within them that could be tapped into by practitioners, and which is unlikely to be as readily available through more limited journal articles:

- Apse, M., Degarege, G., Fountain, J., Espiner, S., Stewart, E. (2022). Food security in a COVID-impacted tourism destination: A case study of Queenstown, New Zealand. [LEaP Research Report No. 62](#). P. 49.
- Bond, J., Dorner, Z., McLeod, L., St John-Ives, G. (2024). Record of the Behaviour Change Workshop in Ōtautahi to protect and restore freshwater biodiversity across urban areas in Aotearoa. [LEaP Research Report No. 65](#). P. 47.
- Hamlin, A., Espiner, S., Degarege, G., Fountain, J. (2022). Exploring the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic-induced border closure on domestic visitors' experience of New Zealand's Great Walks. [LEaP Research Report No. 63](#). P. 93.
- Oranje, K., Farrar, J., Nissen, S., Rennie, H. (2022). Jetties and small settlement regeneration in Te Pataka o Rakaihautū/Banks Peninsula. [LEaP Research Report No. 61](#). P. 9.
- Savage, O., Rennie, H. (2023). Canterbury coastal beach user survey – 2020-2021 summer. [LEaP Research Report No. 64](#). P. 49.

The Joint Waterways Centre for Freshwater Management

In 2009, Lincoln University and the University of Canterbury (UC) established a Water Resource Management Centre now generally referred to as the Waterways Centre. The original purpose was “to serve as a catalyst for water action between teaching, research, regulatory, public interest, and water user organisations”[1]. As a joint centre, the funding of staff and facilities is shared between the two universities. Originally based at both Campuses, in addition to research and an annual postgraduate student conference, the Centre offered undergraduate teaching of pathways to a jointly taught 240 credit Master in Water Resource Management (MWRM) (including a one-year research thesis) which students could enrol at through either university. Led by Professor Jenny Webster-Brown, an environmental geochemist, and with former Canterbury Regional Council CEO and qualified planner Professor Bryan Jenkins on staff, it had a strong freshwater management orientation.

However, the Centre staff and students struggled with integrating the administrative systems of two quite different institutions and found the commuting between universities inconvenient. Jenkins retired to Australia and Webster-Brown left the Centre and headed the Our Land and Water National Science Challenge. The Centre's teaching and related facilities as well as key staff were consolidated to the Canterbury Campus in 2022, resulting in Lincoln staff working alongside UC staff.

The Centre, under Director Professor James Brasington's leadership, furthered its excellent reputation for water science research to inform management through many and varied research consultancy operations and successful research-fund bids, as well as through high quality Master and PhD research. Feedback from practitioners indicates its annual Postgraduate conference continues to be a highlight on the calendar of water researchers, users and managers.

[1] University of Canterbury Memorandum of 10 February 2009 from Alan Nicholson (Head of Civil and Natural Resource Engineering) to Science, Engineering, Business and Economics, and Law HoDs

The Centre’s current vision stated on its website is “to integrate disciplinary water research to provide interdisciplinary solutions to freshwater management problems”. Through its applied research and teaching it “strives to bring bright minds and broad skillsets together to address freshwater challenges in Aotearoa and beyond”. Its research “delivers insights into freshwater quantities, variability and processes ki uta ki tai, from the mountains to the sea. We also search for new ways to work together to address issues in multi-user freshwater systems including in river restoration and policy”.

The joint teaching of the undergraduate programme ended in 2024, the MWRM ended in 2023, and a new 180 credit taught Master in Water Science and Management was launched. It is jointly taught at the Canterbury Campus by staff from each university but with students enrolling only via the University of Canterbury. Students wishing to undertake a thesis can complete a 240 credit MSc (Water Science and Management) at University of Canterbury.

There was a notable shift in emphasis to ‘Water Science and Management’ from ‘Water Resource Management’, reflected in the renamed degrees and four of the five full-time Waterways academics being in biophysical water fields. This appears quite distant from being a ‘catalyst for water action’ as originally developed, but perhaps, reflects wider contextual changes in society and university funding. There is no advisory board of water interests that engage the wider community.

The consolidation at the Canterbury Campus also distanced the Centre from the environmental management policy and planning expertise and courses available at Lincoln. In 2025, to strengthen the freshwater management aspects of the Centre, Lincoln appointed a Co-Director, Professor of Freshwater Management Susie Wood to join Canterbury’s Co-Director, Professor of River Science James Brasington. Professor Wood is based at the Lincoln Campus and enables the Centre to better optimise connections with the freshwater expertise at Lincoln University’s campus (notably in water governance, rural water use and freshwater ecosystem restoration) and facilitate connections with the MBIE-funded New Zealand-China Water Research Centre (hosted by Lincoln University).

Having a greater presence on Lincoln’s campus is expected to enable synergies within the ‘Lincoln Research Hub’ an unofficial term for the cluster of closely aligned research organisations based at Lincoln. AgResearch and Agritech share the Lincoln Campus with the University. Manaaki Whenua – Landcare Research has an adjacent campus. Lincoln also has strong relationships with Selwyn and Ashburton District Councils, rural papatipu rūnanga of Ngāi Tahu and various NGOs and industry groups that are extensively or intensively involved with rural water management issues. New freshwater laboratory facilities and offices for the Waterways Centre Lincoln hub are in the pipeline.

Unlike the other two centres reviewed here, the Waterways Centre has core academic, administrative and technical staff. It produces a significant number of theses and published articles. The latter, regardless of whether they were funded or undertaken through the Centre, are listed under the Centre’s research project areas thus enabling ready access for practitioners to the research articles. It has established its own entity on Google Scholar, but appears to have discontinued its series of reports in 2020.

The reports were similar to LEaP Reports, often funded through summer student scholarships, and were a useful form of providing topical literature reviews and publishing data that would be locally relevant for planners and water managers, but unlikely to feature as usefully in journal articles. At the time of writing, those reports were listed on its website, but the links did not work and searching for the remaining reports at either

university library or on the internet was unsuccessful, with one exception[2]. Authors of reports since Report 2015-02 were also not identified. The following is a selection of reports that, by their titles, might be relevant to environmental planners:

- Markham-Short R. (2012). Compilation of Lincoln University Water Quality Monitoring Data for Lake Ellesmere/Te Waihora Catchment: 1993-2011. WCFM Report 2012 -001.
- Orchard, S., Hickford, M. (2016). Spatial effects of the Canterbury earthquakes on inanga spawning habitat and implications for waterways management. [WCFM & MERG Report 2016-002](#).
- Waterways Center for Freshwater Management. (2018). UC Campus Waterways Health Monitoring. WCFM Report 2018-003.
- Waterways Center for Freshwater Management. (2019a). Behaviour change programmes for prevention of urban stormwater contamination: A literature review. WCFM Report 2019-003.
- Waterways Center for Freshwater Management. (2019b). The relationship between community engagement in urban waterway management and community well-being. WCFM Report 2019-004.
- Waterways Center for Freshwater Management. (2019c). Review of Recreational Value from Urban Waterway and Stormwater Management. WCFM Report 2019-005.
- Waterways Center for Freshwater Management. (2019d). Socio-economic mapping of sub-catchment communities in the Heathcote catchment, Christchurch. WCFM Report 2019-006
- Waterways Center for Freshwater Management. (2020). Waitatari/Harts Creek Bird Hide: Exploring Visitor Book Data (2017-2019). WCFM Report 2020-001.

The Sustainable Property Research Centre

The Sustainable Property Research Centre (SPRC) was established at Lincoln University in 2024 and in terms of its name alone it sounds relevant to planners. From its website, it aims to “partner with government, industry, private enterprise and iwi to advance the quality of land and property in Aotearoa New Zealand, and to discover sustainable solutions to the challenges facing the property sector”. It places its distinctiveness as a world leading property research centre in its focus on “sustainability of property in: management, development, valuation, economics, policy, law, planning, marketing, finance, investment, engineering and construction”.

SPRC undertakes research on:

- Housing, commercial-industry, leisure spaces and infrastructure.
- Property that mitigates and adapts to the responses of climate change.
- Property and the loss of biodiversity to (and from) real property.
- Property rebalancing socio-economic inequities in property, land and construction.

This is clearly relevant to planning and policy practitioners. However, it differs significantly from the other two Centres in that its output is primarily based on PhD research.

[2] As a consequence of researching for this fieldnote, I informed the Waterways administrator of the broken links to its reports and they may well have been restored by the time of publication of this note.

Hosted in the Faculty of AgriBusiness and Commerce, the SPRC, similar to LEaP, does not have any dedicated full-time academic or administrative staff, but its website appears current. Like the Waterways Centre, it provides ready access to the journal publications and completed theses of its associated research staff and PhD students from the home page, but there is no named research report series, seminars, advisory board nor annual reviews. Some PhD students are funded by grants or industry. The Centre encourages people to contact it if they want research done.

Current PhD research directly relevant to planners includes:

- Elina Wang – An examination of intergenerational wealth and housing tenure variations in New Zealand
- Ed Percy – the impact of environmental regulation and environmental incentive programmes on rural land use and rural land values in New Zealand
- Azlina Yassin – Developing new guidelines for riverfront development in Malaysia

Completed research includes:

- Dyason, D., Fieger, P. and Rice, J. (2024). Greened shopping spaces and pedestrian shopping interactions: The case of Christchurch. International Journal of Tourism Cities 10(4): 1247-1265.
- McDonagh, J. (2017). Shattered dreams-inner city revitalisation, gentrification and the Christchurch earthquakes of 2010 and 2011 (Doctoral thesis, Lincoln University).
- McCord, M., McCord, J., MacIntyre, S., Brown, L., Squires, G. (2024). The value of Green and Blue space: walkability and house prices. Cities 154: 15377, p.12.
- Ngo, T., Squires, G., McCord, M., Lo, D. (2023). House Prices, Airport Location Proximity, Air Traffic Volume and the Covid-19 Effect. Regional Studies, Regional Science, 10(1): 418-438.
- Sasu, A., Javed, A., Muhammad, I., Squires, G. (2024). Land banking, land price and Ghana's informal land markets: A relational complexity approach. Land Use Policy 141: 107133, p.14.
- Sasu, A., Squires, G., Javed, A. (2022). Land Banking and Land Markets: A Literature Review. Habitat International 130: 102698, p.13.

Discussion and Conclusion

I chose to review these three research centres largely because I was familiar with each, having been involved in the establishment of all three. However, this was the first time I have specifically looked at them through my perspective as a planning practitioner and in that sense, this became a field note, analysing the website information and drawing on some old files, links and knowledge of where things might be that would not be readily accessible to outsiders. Each of the reviewed research centres is quite different as is readily apparent.

Two clearly emphasise research excellence and attempt to promote the capabilities of their researchers to the international and domestic research communities by emphasising their journal publications and research theses. One has dedicated staff, whereas the others rely more on aligned researchers and students. Only one publishes practitioner-oriented reports. One appears to have no intention to provide such targeted reports and the other appears to have discontinued its report series.

Only one of the three Centres holds a regular conference, in which only the research of its postgraduate students is showcased. None has an advisory board of external interested parties and only one extends an explicit invitation that people wanting research done should contact it. None seem to have forums or newsletters to engage or inform their sectors.

Of concern was that, at the time of writing, the Waterways reports did not appear to be in an accessible format in either of the libraries of the two Universities that host the centre. Unlike the LEaP reports, it is not clear that the Waterways Reports are placed in the national archive or have ISBN numbers. The potential to lose relevant data is worrying.

Interestingly, while LEaP focussed on its role as a clearing house for research, it does not provide direct access to the academic articles published by its members. Both of the other centres made making links to their researchers' work and students' theses a priority.

While the science produced by the two research-focussed centres is valuable the lack of attention to how to put the information into a form that would be useful to planners and policy makers suggests a need for a strategy to engage with the centres. On a visit to Lincoln, a CEO and a (now redundant) Chief Science Advisor for that organisation urged the university to summarise its student and staff research outputs into readily digestible forms – targeting the information for the relevant government bodies. That advice would probably hold for assisting all practitioners and policy analysts and the point could be made more often. Offering summer scholarships or establishing longterm partnerships and associated MOUs might be a way for practitioners and their employers to initiate better engagement.

In summary, the research centres reviewed here are relevant to planning and policy practitioners. However, unless there is a change in focus from trying to increase national and international recognition of research capabilities to a model with objectives similar to LEaP's sharing hub and the original Waterways goal of being a catalyst, it may require practitioners to take the first steps to engage directly.