



'Responsibility' and 'Sustainability' Centres in the United Kingdom

This meeting was kindly sponsored by the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business at
Lancaster University

Context setting

This survey was conducted by the [Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business](#) in partnership with the [British Academy of Management](#) and the [Centre for Research in Sustainability](#) at Royal Holloway in August 2024. One of the strategic focuses of the British Academy of Management is 'sustainable futures' and this work fits within this context.

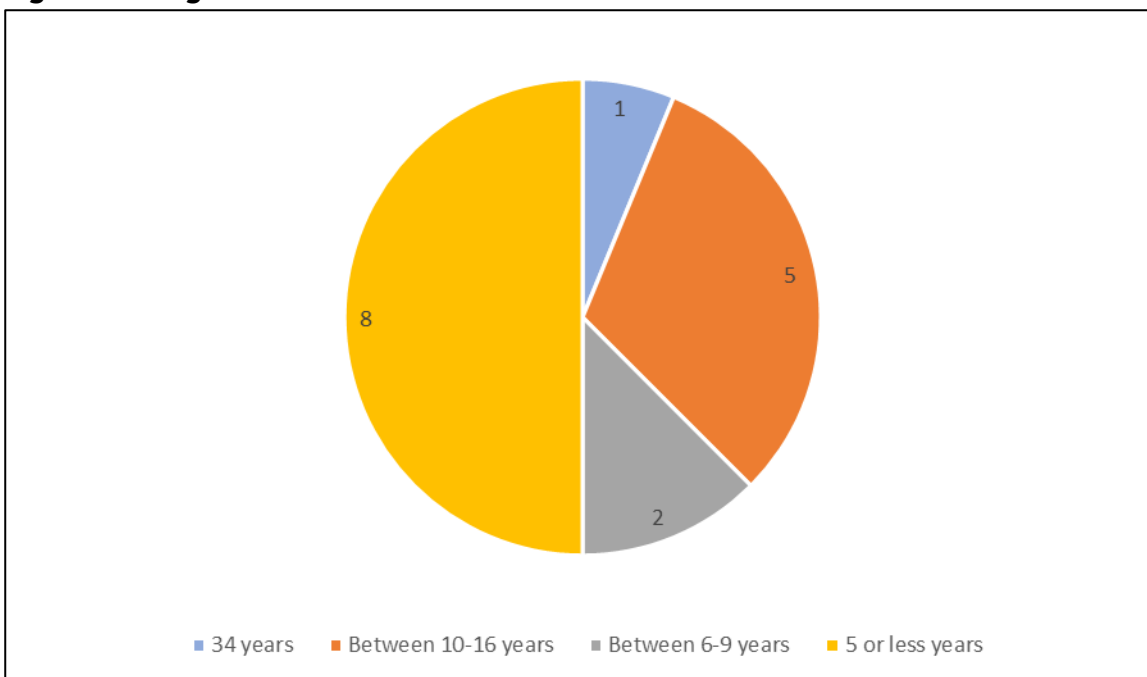
An initial eleven responses were obtained and presented at a workshop on 16-17 May 2024, with an additional five responses being received after the workshop. The purpose of workshop was to start the process of discussing if there is the potential for some form of joint effort to advance the interests of participating centres.

The survey highlights that centres are diverse in their constitution with a multitude of relevant topics being addressed. While funding and governance arrangements differ, there are common resourcing challenges.

Centre demographics

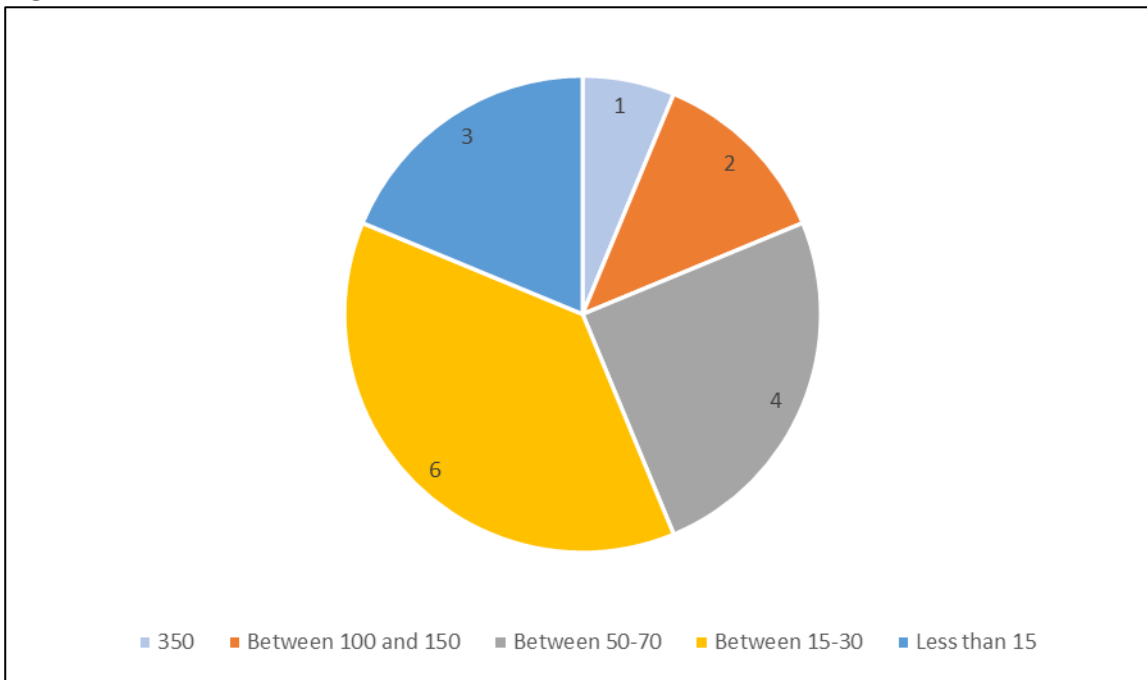
The most longstanding centre was founded 34 years ago, reflecting an early capacity building effort for social/environmental focused research. Six centres have been in existence for more than a decade with ten centres being more recently constituted.

Figure 1: Length of time centres have been established



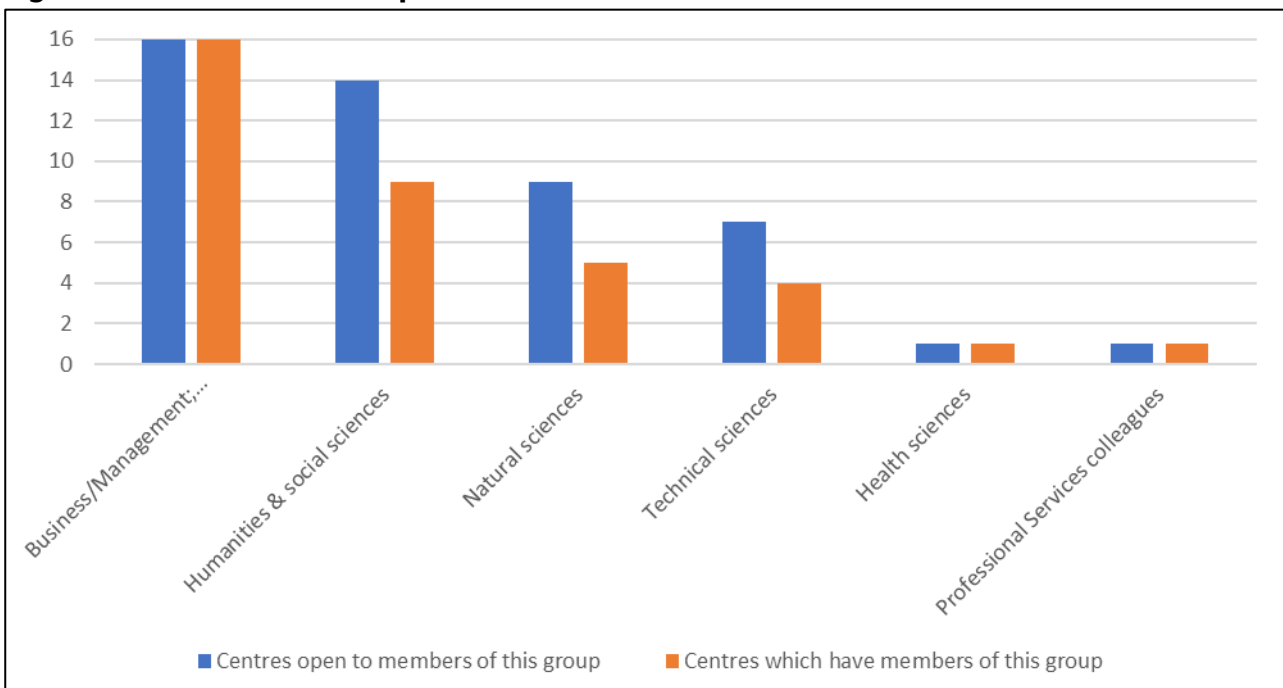
Membership numbers show considerable variation, which reflects, in part, the scope and formality of centre membership. For example, the largest centre has a global membership, other centres have a network of loosely affiliated members or a small set of members for who centre membership is their main institutional focus (see next page).

Figure 2: Number of members



Centres are open to interaction across all organisational focused disciplines as well as a variety of other disciplinary fields. It was notable that accounting/finance academics have a substantive presence in the centres surveyed but may not always describe themselves as sitting within ‘business and management’ (to some degree the same holds true for economists). In the main, centres have fewer members from disciplines outside of their core disciplinary focus. Only one centre incorporated their institution’s Professional Services colleagues as members in their own right (due to personal interests), rather than due to their job roles.

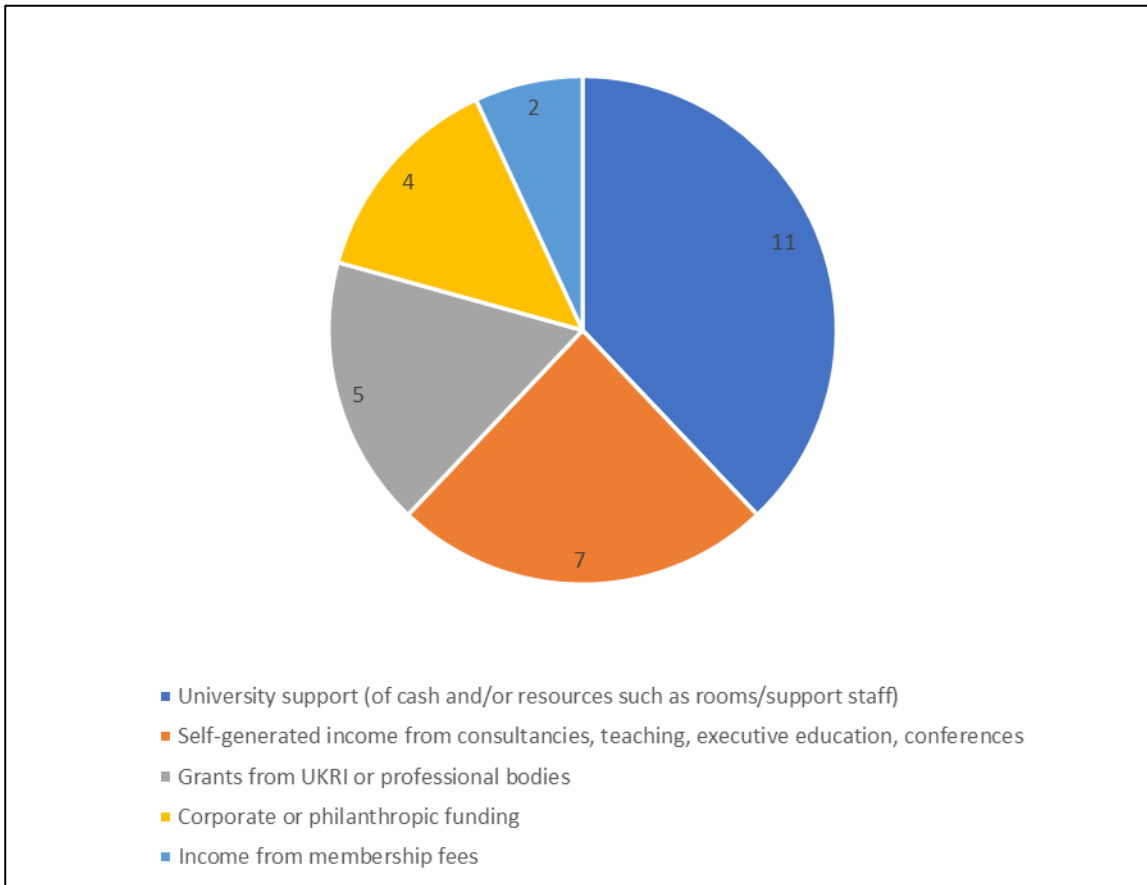
Figure 3: Centre membership



Centre resourcing

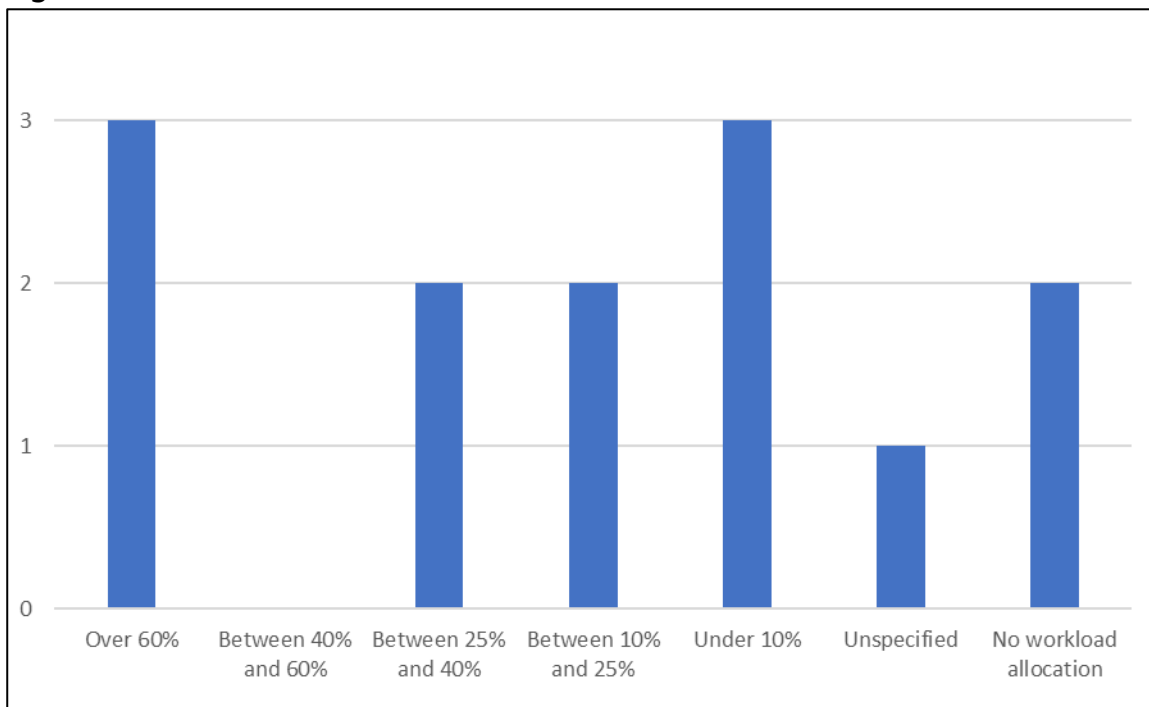
Resourcing of centres has three elements: funding, support afforded to Centre leaders, and Professional Services support. Some centres had a mix of income streams while others relied on one- or two-income streams. From these figures, UKRI grants could be a greater source of funding than they are currently.

Figure 4: Sources of funding



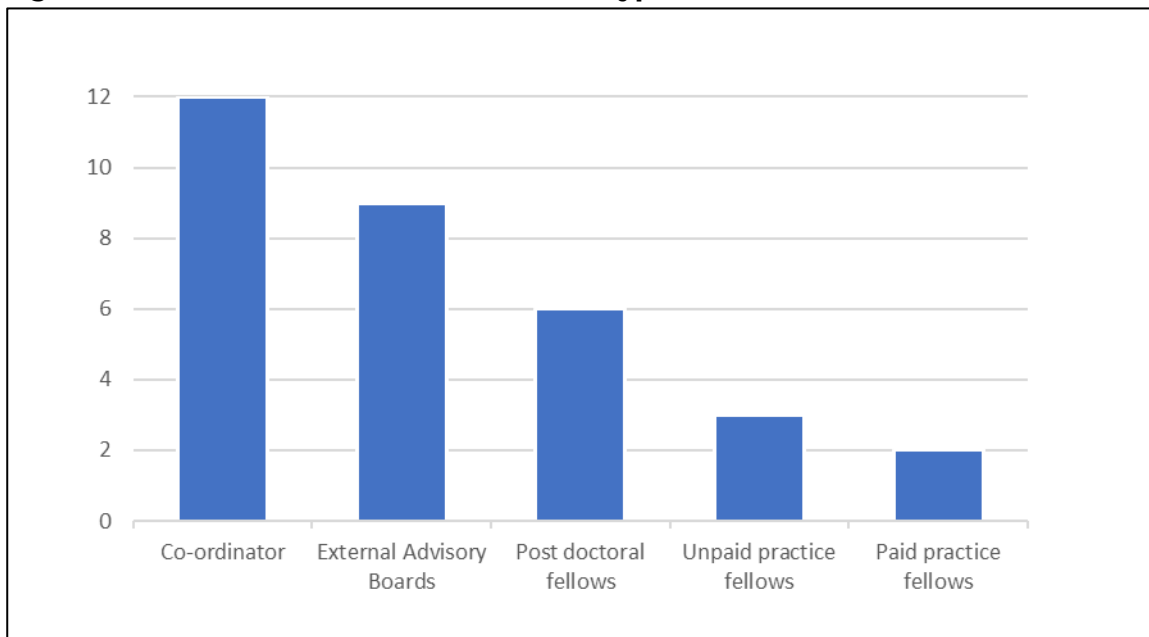
While relief from a 'standard' workload for Centre leads was the norm (with 13 of the 16 responses having load attached), some leads had zero workload attached to the role. We are aware that after the initial survey this was rectified for one centre (that is workload credit was assigned to leads), and this is reflected in the figures below (% FTE relates to the percentage of a 100% workload that is allocated for Centre leadership). In some cases, workload allocations were shared between co-leads and co-leadership was present for three of the centres surveyed.

Figure 5: No. of centres with different % FTE workload allocation for lead(s)



The majority (but not all) Centres also had co-ordination support through roles such as ‘centre co-ordinators’, noting that not all of these posts were full time. With a focus on governance, a majority (but again not all) Centres had external advisory boards and links to practice via centre fellowships. These kinds of posts were not usually remunerated, but some were.

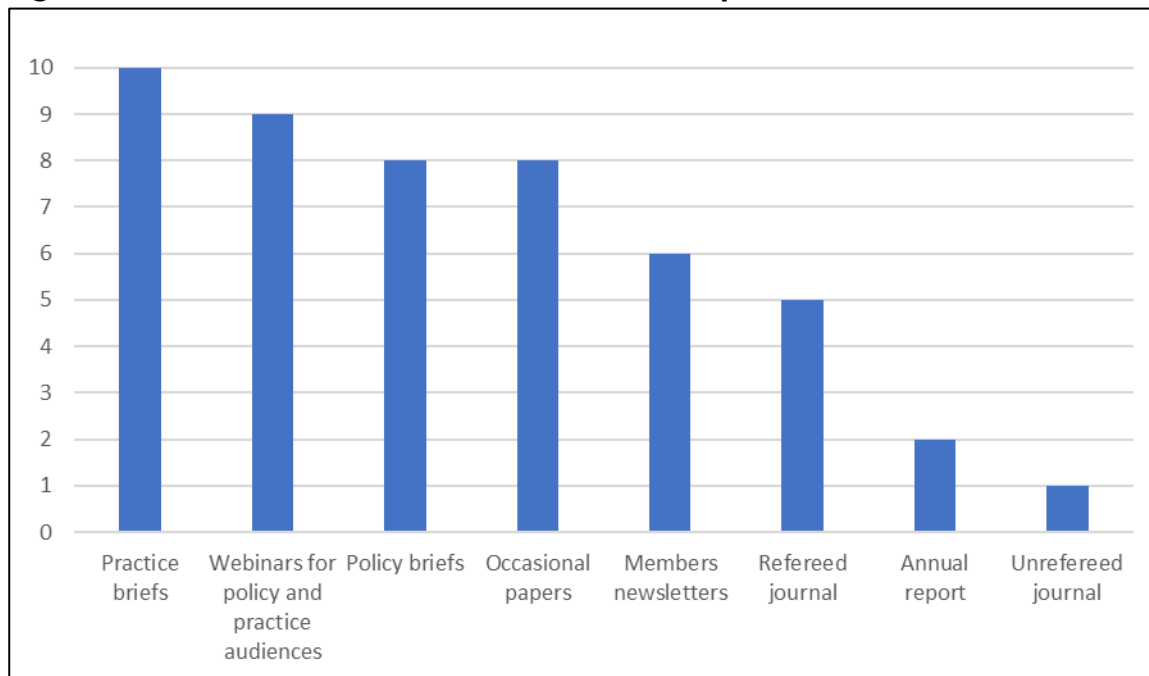
Figure 6: No. of centres with different role types



Centre outputs and topic focus

Centres produced a wide variety of outputs beyond academic articles generated by their members. In some cases, centres were also hosting journals.

Figure 7: No. of centres with different forms of outputs



It is impossible to do justice to the wide variety of topics on which research was being conducted (this ranged over all sustainability topics); the conceptual frames being used for the work (which was again diverse) and the processes/activities being researched. The diversity means that we feel confident that work is being conducted on all aspects of sustainability and all aspects of organisational functioning somewhere in the UK. Of course, knowing who is conducting the most salient research in each area is not straightforward. This observation suggests that a deeper understanding of centre themes would be helpful to an academic and non-academic audience (especially considering some of the hopes and dreams noted below).

Hopes & dreams and challenges

This material draws from the workshop discussions as well as the survey responses where hopes and dreams, and challenges were discussed.

In the area of hopes and dreams, colleagues were interested in:

- Research collaborations (for papers, projects and grants). The potential to create large-scale, inter-disciplinary and cross-sector projects was of interest where the 'sum of the parts' of centres were believed to be greater than each on their own. Interest in this aspect of collaboration was underpinned by a desire to access larger research grants (addressing aspects of financial security) and to create greater impact (there was an interest in how to accelerate industry engagement at a regional level). In addition, there was an interest in understanding how UK centres could work together on the global stage.
- Sharing of best practice on how to run centres and figuring out how to thrive within host institutions (especially if university leadership view sustainability centres as 'just' another

theme) as also a desire. Under this theme, how to strategically engage external bodies/individuals was of interest.

- How research centres could create ‘whole institution’ effects to ensure the sector undertakes its own sustainability transitions was of interest to some. In this respect, impacts beyond publications and rankings were sought.

The challenges noted by respondents included:

- Capacity issues: respondents noted that demand always exceeding supply leaving colleagues too thinly spread. Hiring and retaining good colleagues was noted as an ongoing challenge (this suggests that some capacity building for a critical mass of scholars would be valuable). In addition, ensuring that PhD students are fully engaged with centres was also noted as challenging by some, along with the belief that PhDs could be central to dynamic centres.
- Host institution governance: how to ask for support from host institutions, and the kinds of support that could be sought, were topics highlighted by respondents. Likewise, how to creatively deal with host institution criteria for success was noted as a challenge. These aspects suggest that sharing knowledge of what is available in across the sector will be valuable for centre leads, especially those new to the role.
- Navigating moments of change: respondents highlighted a range of issues under this heading, including: leadership changes (and, relatedly, succession planning); surviving funding cliff edges and gaps in activity; changing governance models/inheriting governance models that are not fit for purpose; and changes in research priorities (including developing new streams of work).
- Sustainability research challenges were also noted, such as the relative lack of quality outlets for sustainability research (and lack of access to more traditional high-ranking journals) and the general push within academia to specialisation at the expense of inter-disciplinary work.

Next steps

We hope that this survey summary is helpful to centre leads, regardless of participation in the survey. The outcomes of the workshop included the formulation of a group of centre leads that wished to take forward the idea of developing stronger ties between centres in the UK. If you wish to be involved in that activity or to be kept in touch with possibilities for joint working between centres, please contact [Professor Emma Macdonald](#) (BAM Vice-Chair Sustainability) or [Professor Jan Bebbington](#) (Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business).

To enable the work recorded here to be completed, a list of sustainability/responsibility research centres in the UK was collated. The list (see Annex I) is likely incomplete so please do be in touch to add hitherto unknown centres to the list. Likewise, please feel free to share this document with anyone you think will find it helpful.

Annex I: Summary of research centres identified to date (n=34)

Centre name, Institution

- Adam Smith Observatory of Corporate Reporting Practices, University of Glasgow
- Birkbeck Responsible Business Centre, Birkbeck, University of London
- Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, University of Cambridge
- Centre for Business, Climate Change and Sustainability, University of Edinburgh
- Centre for Business, Organisation and Society, University of Bath
- Centre for Business in Society, Coventry University
- Centre for Business Ethics and Sustainability, Henley Business School (University of Reading)
- Centre for Business, Society and Global Challenges, Oxford- Brookes University
- Centre for Circular Economy and Advanced Sustainability, Aston University
- Centre for Consumers and Sustainable Consumption, Durham University
- Centre for Environmental and Energy Economics at Durham University Business School
- Centre for Research into Accounting and Finance in Context, University of Sheffield
- Centre for Research in Sustainability, Royal Holloway, University of London
- Centre for Responsible Business, University of Birmingham
- Centre for Social and Environmental Accounting Research, University of St Andrews Business School
- Centre for Sustainable Business, Kings College London, University of London
- Centre for Sustainable Finance, University of Cambridge
- Centre for Sustainable Innovation, University of Salford
- Consumer, Business and Community Behaviour and Management, University of Plymouth
- ETHOS: the Centre for Responsible Enterprise, Bayes Business School, University of London
- Exeter Sustainable Finance Centre, University of Exeter
- International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility, Nottingham University Business School
- Initiative for Leadership and Sustainability, University of Cumbria
- Leonardo Centre on Business for Sustainability, Imperial College Business School
- Oxford Sustainable Finance Group, University of Oxford
- Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business, Lancaster University
- Responsible Business, Northumbria University
- Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment, University of Oxford
- Stephen Young Institute for International Business, University of Strathclyde
- Sustainable Business Group, Cranfield University
- Sustainable Business Research Institute, Leeds Beckett University
- Sustainable Consumption Institute, University of Manchester
- Sustainability Accounting, Finance and Economics research mobilization group, University of Sussex
- Warwick collective/soon to be centre, Warwick Business School

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British Academy of Management Ltd

Published November 2024
British Academy of Management
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