This collection of papers marks the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the Third Sector Research Centre in England, and we are grateful to the editors of this journal, Ruth Simsa and Taco Brandsen, and the journal publishers, Springer, for the opportunity to make available contributions made by TSRC to Voluntas since 2009.

TSRC represented a major investment in scholarship in this field, which – in the UK at least – had been somewhat underdeveloped, though this is not to decry the considerable efforts of many prominent British researchers. With core funding (from the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council, the Office for the Third Sector, and the Barrow Cadbury Trust) supporting us until 2014, we established a substantial critical mass of academic faculty, postdoctoral researchers and graduate students at the universities of Birmingham, Southampton, Kent and Middlesex. Since 2014 the Barrow Cadbury Trust and the University of Birmingham have generously contributed further support and we have had a number of successes in securing research grants.

The core focus of TSRC has been on the roles, resources and relationships of the third sector, including a diverse population of organisations albeit with primary foci on charities and social enterprises. Underlying this is significant work on the theoretical and evidence base for third sector research; when we were established, there was no single centre in the UK with a focus on this field and nor had there been a serious academic effort to build the research and evidence base. The papers we have published in Voluntas reflect significant themes in the centre’s work, and show how we have made contributions to international scholarship in the field.

Alcock and Kendall (2011) argue that the third sector itself is a highly contested term. Framing their discussion with respect to the period of the Labour governments (1997-2010), they argue that the process of constituting the third sector was associated not with a stable and consistent set of definitions and constructs, but with unstable and changing formulations which reflect the playing-out of a dual process of decontestation (that is, the third sector was a field marked by a broad, and shared, consensus) and contention.

TSRC has also made significant contributions to the evidence base, leading to more sophisticated quantification of the distribution of and trends in funding for third sector organisations. Such work is represented here in the paper by Clifford and Mohan (2016), which develops an organisation-level perspective on finances, drawing on their work with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations on the construction of a sample of charities from which detailed financial data are captured annually. They demonstrate significant differences between organisations in the composition of income, which are related to the different roles charities played in a mixed economy of welfare. An earlier contribution, drawing on different data, is provided by McKay et al (2015), which provides important evidence regarding processes of marketization among charities.

The impacts of the third sector are the subject of significant contention. The paper by Kamerade and McKay (2015) explores the issue of job satisfaction and well-being among employees in the voluntary sector. It is found that there are gender differences: both men and women in the sector experience higher levels of fulfilment at work than private-sector employees but only men in the voluntary sector report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction than in the private sector, while women in the voluntary sector appear to have lower levels of life satisfaction than their counterparts elsewhere.
Turning to the impact of third sector organisations, Arvidson and Lyon’s (2014) study shows that not all organisations comply slavishly with requests for demonstrations of their impact. Many use their discretion in determining what to measure, how to measure it, and what to report. This can be a proactive process, using impact measurement for learning and promotional purposes, and as a way of exerting control.

Bovaird and Loeffler (2012) explore a different facet of the impact of the third sector, namely the role of volunteers in the co-production of public services between community groups, volunteers and statutory bodies. The terms of engagement here are very important. Citizens are only willing to engage in relation to a narrow range of activities that are genuinely important to them. They also demonstrate risks associated with co-production. In particular, while co-production with volunteers and communities may have the potential for improved outcomes and cost savings, it is not cost-free; it may represent value for money but cannot produce value without money.

The question of the identity of the third sector runs through this collection, and the three remaining papers address this in different ways. McMullin and Skelcher (2018) make an important comparative contribution through a study of nonprofits involved in community regeneration initiatives in France and England. They demonstrate the existence of different institutional logics for organisational activity (state, market and community logics) and show how these differed between the two contexts studied, in terms of their influence on the hybrid character of the organisations. Mullins and Acheson (2014) investigate the complex process of hybridisation of third sector housing and related support organisations in Northern Ireland. The analysis focusses, as does the discussion of impact measurement by Arvidson and Lyon (2014), on the extent of agency exercised by third sector organisations, as they adapt to and negotiate external drivers for change. Finally, drawing on in-depth longitudinal work pioneered in the UK by TSRC, Arvidson (2018) questions the portrayal of organizational change as a linear trajectory towards isomorphism, identifying plural dimensions of change that are not easily reducible to one-dimensional interpretations. She presents an analytical framework comprising of four components: evolving change, episodic change, inherent dilemmas, and conflicting logics, contributing to an understanding of processes which goes beyond a study of the effect on the organisation of an overarching external institutional framework.

Overall we hope the papers give an insight, for a wide readership, of the contributions that TSRC has made thus far to third sector scholarship. As more of our early-career scholars and doctoral students take up academic posts, we look forward to numerous further contributions over the next decade.

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