

Commissioned Research: Who drives the agenda?

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Introduction

Most educational research in Australia is currently conducted within higher education institutions, with finance primarily being provided from general operating grants. In recent years however, the level of research support included in operating grants as expressed per full time researcher has declined (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 1995:2). Moreover, enrolment growth in higher education faculties is predicted to be relatively slow during the 1990s and thus the funding of educational research from operating grants is not likely to expand substantially in the foreseeable future (Australian Research Council, 1992: 98-99).

The relative stagnation of funding from traditional sources has encouraged and been accompanied by a rapid expansion of externally funded research contracts with government and non-government organisations for specific purposes (AVCC, 1995:2). On one hand this may be viewed as an attempt by the universities to compensate for operating grant funding shortfalls. It may also be seen as part of a longer term shift towards the applied end of the research spectrum that began in the 1980s, and as a response to a greater emphasis in government higher education policy since 1990 on relevance, university-industry links and commercialisation (Senate Standing Committee, 1994: 106-107).

The commissioning of research by a government or non-government

organisation for a specific purpose raises a number of professional and ethical issues for researchers and their universities. This paper seeks to identify and examine some of these issues, drawing on a recently completed research project that had been commissioned by a non-government organisation. Some details of the background of the project will first be provided, followed by a coverage of a selection of issues and a drawing of general conclusions.

Background of the project

In October 1992, the Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes in New South Wales (CLRI) commissioned the Poor and Catholic Schools (PACS) Research Project. The aim of the project was to identify

current perceptions, strategies, practices, capacities and issues in relation to the poor and New South Wales Catholic schools as a base for future action in this area. The project was seen as a first stage in which data would be collected to provide a clear picture of what is currently happening in schools in relation to the poor and the issues arising from this. This stage was seen as providing a basis for schools, systems and other interested parties to determine appropriate courses of action to deal with the current situation and issues. The project developed in response to a need identified by the Education Committee of the CLRI for such a study. Their clear intention was to initiate a project that would generate confirmatory data relating to the needs of the poor and related issues as a means of provoking action in the community. Accordingly, the Education Committee drew up a study brief and invited the writers of this paper to prepare a detailed research proposal. A draft proposal was developed and discussed with an advisory group drawn from members of the Education Committee and Catholic education system personnel. In response to issues and suggestions arising from these discussions, a final version of the proposal was developed and presented to the CLRI. In October 1992, the CLRI accepted the proposal and commissioned the conduct of the PACS project.

Issues arising

A number of issues arise in the development, implementation and reporting of commissioned research. In the following sections, the experience of the PACS project will be used to provide examples of some of these issues and the ways in which they were addressed in a specific project. As will be seen, the researchers were not faced with major dilemmas or conflict situations in this case, given the nature of the research project and the particular views held by the sponsors of the project on a range of ethical and professional matters. This is not to deny however the importance of the issues and the need to pay greater attention to them within an increasingly competitive research funding context.

Is the research commissioned to confirm a predetermined viewpoint?

The decision of the CLRI to commission a research project was based on a number of conclusions that its Education Committee had reached in relation to the poor. These may be identified as:

- i. there are significant and perhaps increasing numbers of poor children and families in the community,
- ii. Catholic schools have a particular role to play in addressing the needs of the poor,
- iii. efforts being made by Catholic schools may not always be sufficient in addressing the needs of the poor, and
- iv. there may well be a number of children that are being excluded from Catholic schools by virtue of being poor.

The CLRI accordingly wished to lay the ground for action that would redress what it believed to be shortcomings in current provisions for the poor. Its focus was thus expressed in terms of a mapping exercise that would identify and analyse current perceptions, practices and capacities and the related issues needing to be addressed as part of more effective action.

Initial discussions with the Education Committee indicated that while its members may have had particular views as to what might be found in the research, their prime concern was to generate an accurate portrayal of the poor and Catholic schools. Their focus was thus on a process that would facilitate a longer term strategy (more effective action in

relation to the poor) rather the confirming of a predetermined viewpoint or position. Indeed, the nature of the focus created the possibility that the research may in fact have generated findings inconsistent with the Committee's views, such as, for example, that being poor was not a significant factor in the exclusion of children from Catholic schools, or that current efforts by schools were sufficient to address the needs of the poor. This latter possibility in turn carried the potential of undermining their belief in the need for the longer term action strategy.

These initial discussions between the researchers and the Committee served to identify and reinforce the view that the research could not and would not guarantee outcomes that were prespecified by either party. The AVCC (1995:8) noted that

Increasingly, contracts are offered which state that funds will be provided on achievement of certain 'milestones' which are identified by the researcher prior to the commencement of the project. This is acceptable providing such milestones represent research carried out and not particular results achieved.

The avoidance of prespecified results was further promoted by the researchers with the incorporation in the proposal of use of participant defined concepts in the portrayal of current contexts, processes and issues. Thus, for example, participants from schools were asked to define the poor in relation to their own school community and to identify current practices relating to the needs of those that they would include in such a definition. This led to a much broader view of poorness than that provided through the use of traditional indicators such as the Henderson poverty lines. It also served to indicate considerable agreement across a range of school and community settings throughout NSW as to the multidimensional nature of poorness, encompassing social, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, cultural, and physical aspects as well as financial or economic.

Are some outcomes acceptable and others not?

The avoidance of prespecified outcomes does not necessarily mean ready acceptance by a commissioning body of the particular outcomes that emerge from the research. An increasingly common requirement in commissioned research is the submission of a draft report for discussion with the commissioning body as a prelude to production of the final report. This may be further reinforced by the tying of a progress payment to the draft submission. Such a requirement carries the possibility of pressure being placed on the researchers to modify report components, including findings and recommendations.

In the PACS study, there was an understanding that a draft report be submitted and discussed with two members of the Education Committee. The intention in this case was to examine the format of the report in terms of its potential impact on the various audiences to which it would finally be presented. Changing the content was not at issue in this case.

This situation corresponded with the later position proposed by the AVCC (1995:9), namely that contracts refer to reports as being 'in a format agreed with the sponsor' rather than 'to the satisfaction of the sponsor'. The AARE's Code of Ethics for Research in Education (1995:8) reinforces this view by stating that 'researchers should not agree to conduct research in which the analysis or findings are subject to modification by funding agencies before they are published'. The American Educational Research Association (1992:26) further states that

researchers should not accept contracts that require multiple reports that distort or mislead.

A less visible source of censorship may occur through the practice of research contracts only being given to those researchers and institutions sympathetic to the position or stance of the commissioning body, as noted by Armitage (1995:30). The first contract undertaken

for a particular body by a researcher may well become the litmus test for the offering of future contracts. As Scriven and Kramer (1994:3) note in an analysis of commissioned evaluations, there is a distinct likelihood of both penalty attached to producing unacceptable results (not hired in future) and reward attached to producing acceptable results (further commissions).

Researchers may also exercise a form of censorship by deciding to avoid certain potentially researchable issues or sponsors. Chambers and Wieneke (1991) provide an example of a Women's Research Centre that will not accept research funding from companies that manufacture products that are detrimental to women's or the nation's health, such as cigarette companies. The issue here however would seem to be not wanting to promote by association a particular set of views or products rather than taking steps that facilitate 'more acceptable' outcomes in research.

Who controls the research design?

Researchers traditionally have been responsible for developing and justifying their research design. With the growth of externally funded research contracts for specific purposes, the direct involvement of commissioning bodies in research design has increasingly emerged as an issue. Initially, this involvement may be seen in terms of detail spelt out in the research project brief or specifications. Thus there may be specification of particular research strategies (for example, survey plus case studies), data collection methods (for example, document analysis and interviews) or types of evidence (for example, quantitative). Details may also be spelt out of the nature and extent of sampling.

Researchers in this situation have a responsibility to assess the appropriateness of the specifications in the light of their own understanding of research design options and implications. In some cases, this may lead to a decision not to proceed or alternatively to seek discussions with the commissioning body about the research design.

In the case of the PACS study, the printed brief did not enter into design detail. The initial discussion with the Education Committee did reveal however a strong commitment to quantitative approaches in research by one or two of its members. The researchers, in preparing a detailed proposal, opted for a primarily qualitative or interpretive approach, given the study's focus. This approach and the reasons for its selection were detailed in the research proposal which was then discussed with the Education Committee.

The discussion provided an opportunity for the Committee members to raise questions about both the proposed approach and methodology and other alternatives. In this situation, the researchers found themselves taking on an educative role in that some of the Committee

members had not had much experience of research or specifically qualitative research. The understanding throughout the discussion was that either party could elect not to proceed if there was any fundamental disagreement on the nature of the proposal. As it turned out, the Committee accepted the proposal and the project proceeded

accordingly.

Is the timeline appropriate?

One of the features of commissioned research is the setting of deadline and completion dates by the commissioning body according to its own specific purposes and agenda. Often the timelines are quite tight, given the perceived need to find quick advice or quick answers to problems or to ensure that the project funding is fully accounted for within the current financial reporting period. In such cases the timeline is effectively non-negotiable.

The question raised here for the researcher is similar to that raised in relation to prespecified design. Is the timeline appropriate in terms of what the research is designed to achieve? Does it allow for the unexpected events that may serve to introduce delays? Johnston and Proudford (1994) provide an account of an externally funded action research project in which bureaucratic delays significantly reduced the time available for participants to complete their tasks, leading to considerable stress, guilt, and misgivings about the project. The potential effects of time pressures on the quality of the project and its findings warrant serious attention in assessing the appropriateness of prespecified timelines.

Are there controls on publication?

If we assume that a key function of universities is to extend the frontiers of knowledge, the dissemination of knowledge is of considerable importance. Thus as the AARE Code of Ethics states,

Researchers have a duty to disseminate research results to stakeholders, to other researchers, to their students and to the general public. (AARE, 1995:7)

In a similar vein, the American Educational Research Association (1992:26) states

Educational researchers are free to interpret and publish their findings without censorship or approval from individuals or organisations, including sponsors, funding agencies, participants, colleagues, supervisors, or administrators.

As the AVCC (1995:7) notes, the issue of publication rights in part

depends on who owns the intellectual property and the right to exploit it commercially. This aspect may necessitate the incorporation of an embargo on publication, not for an indefinite period but for a limited and specified time. The AVCC indicates a preferred time of 12 months with the possibility of extending this to 18 months if there are reasons that are particularly compelling. A similar limited embargo may be argued in the case of politically sensitive research.

The terms of externally commissioned research contracts may include client veto rights over publication. Armitage (1995) cites the practices of two Australian universities in relation to such terms. One of them will not agree to veto rights on publication for its researchers but it does have a commercial arm to which it refers such research. The Director of the National Research Institute of the other university is quoted as saying that he is 'not too fussed in general' about signing away publication rights in government contracts because 'we only do a small amount of work in this area'. In further justifying this stand, he is quoted as saying that it is important to maintain relations with government departments, and to stay abreast of

interesting research areas, so 'if it is an interesting project, and we can't publish once in a while, it doesn't matter'.

Commercial exploitation of intellectual property was not an issue in the PACS study, given its particular focus. It did have the potential however of reporting material that could be seen as politically sensitive by education systems, schools and Church bodies. The fairly standard procedures in relation to anonymity and confidentiality for participants were adopted for the study but the possibility still existed of issues emerging that could reflect adversely on particular parties or institutions. No restrictions however were placed on the researchers' rights to publish, in terms of both the formal report or subsequent writings. The matter was raised in the early discussions about the project and the position of the CLRI was confirmed in writing. A major factor in this decision was the presence of open discussion of publication matters at a very early stage in proceedings and the willingness of the commissioning body to trust the professional integrity of the researchers.

To whom are the researchers accountable?

The undertaking of commissioned research signals accountability to the commissioning body. But is there also accountability to other parties such as participants from whom data are collected and individuals and groups with legitimate but different interests from those of the commissioning body in the matter being researched?

In part, this is an issue of research focus and design discussed earlier. Researchers need to ensure that the targeted nature of the

research is not creating limits that threaten its general validity and integrity. To find, for example, that a particular product or service is creating significant benefits for one segment of society in which the commissioning body has a proprietary interest without exploring its possible harmful effects on other parties may well indicate both incomplete research and a quite limited view of accountability.

It also relates to the issue of freedom to publish. As the AARE (1995:7) notes, all stakeholders and the general public should have access to research results, with the onus for dissemination resting on the researcher. Potential conflicts in accountability need to be identified as part of the research negotiation process so that clear guidelines can be established as part of the terms of engagement.

In the PACS study, it was the view of the researchers that accountability would extend beyond the commissioning body to the study's participants (individuals, schools and system authorities), Church organisations, welfare bodies, the general public, and in particular, the poor. Thus it was important to try to tap into the interests, experiences, and perceptions of those parties as sources of data as well as to promote wide access to findings that would emerge from the study.

The CLRI endorsed this view and took steps to promote awareness of the study and to facilitate researcher access to data from a wide range of interested parties. The responsibility for identifying the particular sources and techniques of data collection remained however with the researchers. The findings of the study were released at a public launching organised by the CLRI and to which a variety of people from various interest groups and the media were invited. Over 1,000 copies of the report were printed and distributed to participants in the study and other parties in the educational, Church and broader community.

Conclusions

A number of issues arising in the commissioning of research for specific purposes have been identified in this paper, focusing on preconceived viewpoints, acceptability of outcomes, determination of research design, timelines, publication rights, and accountability. A common theme in these issues is that of the locus of control, i.e. who decides in each case and on what basis.

It is contended that the central driving factor in each of these issues should be that of the fundamental integrity of the research process. In that sense, it does not really matter who makes the decisions or what the decisions are, provided that the researcher is convinced that the validity of the research has not been compromised.

Ideally, the growth in commissioned research will carry with it

increasing attention to early and detailed dialogue between researchers and commissioning bodies as a means of promoting shared understanding of the issues and appropriate agreement on their resolution in each case. This may at times involve the researcher in an educative role, particularly in cases where the commissioning bodies have little experience or appreciation of research principles and practices. It may also signal the need for researchers to develop deeper awareness of the constraints and imperatives confronting commissioning bodies and to look for more creative ways of accommodating both the needs of such bodies and our own research expectations.

In effect, the growing emphasis on commissioned research suggests significant changes in the relationship between researchers and funding bodies. As Hocking (1990:14) notes, these changes will require some researchers to develop new skills related to interacting with various interest groups and bodies. Researchers will need to work increasingly with, as well as for, funding bodies in order to maintain appropriate research standards. In the words of the American Educational Research Association (1992:26),

Researchers, research institutions, and sponsors of research jointly share responsibility for the ethical integrity of research, and should ensure that this integrity is not violated.

Postscript

One outcome of the PACS project has been the commencement by the authors of a national two to three year study focusing on access to Catholic schooling. This study is being jointly funded by the National Catholic Education Commission and Australian Catholic University, thereby creating a further dimension to the matters raised in the paper, i.e. working with more than one commissioning body on a specific project. Details of this latter project and of the issues involved will be published in due course.

A summary of the main findings of the PACS study is available from either of the authors who may be contacted through the addresses below.

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