

Editorial

Welcome to the twelfth issue of *Building Research Capacity*, a journal of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). In this issue Macnab and Thomas report on their recent TLRP seminar series investigating the issue of quality in educational research. One of their conclusions about the importance of *replication* in educational research should be one that perhaps we need to consider more fully. Crozier and Clayton then report on some of the methodological challenges they have encountered in undertaking their TLRP study on the socio-cultural and learning experiences of working-class students in HE. Elliott then outlines the highly innovative use of archived children's essays, collected as part of the NCDS in 1969, and shows how this can bridge qualitative and quantitative approaches to research. Bardsley and Wiles then summarise their recent consultation to identify current research needs in research methods in the UK.

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Quality in Educational Research: Community Assessment

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The TLRP *Quality in Educational Research seminar series* explored issues that are applicable to all research: how can we be sure that we can trust the methods and analyses that we and others use, and how can we have confidence in the conclusions that we draw from these? We have looked at the construction and receipt of facts, the nature of evidence, and the kinds of 'warrants' that can be obtained for analysis and how these may differ between kinds of educational research.

Aside from paradigmatic markers for quality (for example, the satisfactoriness of experimental design and analysis in quantitative work), the seminar series examined more general preconditions for quality, such as the nature of evidence and its form in different disciplinary and epistemological traditions. Conclusions here related to the significance of multi-method approaches and those addressing issues of sufficiency of evidence and corroboration in the establishment of quality.

Much discussion of quality in educational research has centred on criteria or warrants for the satisfactoriness of a piece of work and it is understandable that in research that is funded from the public purse there should be diligence about the appropriateness and usefulness of

that research and the probity with which it is conducted. Funders will insist that research is not merely frivolous or self-indulgent, and that it is relevant to significant issues and questions; they will seek assurances that it will be conducted without waste; they will want to know that it is conducted according to the best standards – procedural, methodological, ethical – of the scientific community in which it is undertaken. These, then, can be taken as markers in some sense of research quality.

But there are problems in using such criteria as general markers for quality. One needs first to ask 'Quality for whom?' - for the funder and the university researcher will surely rank any such criteria differently. The academic may question the value of research that is specifically directed toward questions that are considered to be significant, and may point to the plethora of scientific discoveries deriving from serendipitous events, often accidental artifacts of the ostensible purpose of any inquiry (see Roberts, 1989; Thagard, 1998). Indeed, it sometimes seems that the great majority of significant advance in scientific research derives from these quasi-random assays into inquiry. The academic may also point to the compromises enjoined

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on research that is not entirely curiosity-driven.

Further, there will even be major areas of disagreement among individual researchers. Education sits in an unusual position in a disciplinary sense, drawing as it does from a variety of methodological traditions and with particular expectations of an articulation between research, theory and practice. This makes the general definition of quality peculiarly difficult as each tradition stresses different parameters and conditions for quality, with very little shared in world-view. There are also more general concerns about attempts to define quality that are articulated across all academic disciplines. The concern here is that any stress on quality is accompanied by conservatism and defensiveness in any community of assessors with the possibilities that innovation in the use of method is inhibited and that unoriginal work is encouraged. This concern about conservatism is at the root of much criticism of peer review itself, which is said to foster cronyism, block innovation and creativity, and favour 'projects with predictable outcomes and usually rejects novel higher risk proposals' (Berezin, 2001). It is a system that Berezin (2001) says encourages researchers to produce work that is safe and has been done before, promoting 'mediocrity and triviality rather than true innovation' (p.97).

Beyond specific criteria there are other significant ways in which quality is assessed and these are principally through social assessment: communities of practice in research and inquiry. Indeed, it is interesting to note that attempts to define the parameters of quality in social research (e.g. Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis, Dillon, 2003; Becker, Bryman, Sempik, 2006; Furlong & Oancea, 2005) have sought to use such community assessment. The attempt of Becker and his colleagues was based on a ranking of quality criteria by synthesising views about quality in social policy re-

search from the social policy community. The ultimate determinant of the quality of research therefore rests on the judgement of peers.

One has to note, though, that different constituencies will employ different priorities and means in the assessment of quality and significance. In the academy this community assessment occurs at two levels. There is, first, the screening of quality in peer review seeking the positive – in seeking out that which appears to be significant for the community, and which is conducted according to the standards of rigour, accuracy and balance expected by the community. Second, there is the elimination of the negative, as for example in the detection of systematic bias in the reporting of literature, or in the detection of fraud. It should be noted that the education community has no noteworthy record of success in these latter respects and has no formal procedures for dealing with misconduct.

But there is another, equally important element in the process of peer review and community assessment which occurs in the science, technology, engineering and medicine (STEM) subjects but only infrequently occurs in education and the social sciences. This is in the engagement of the community in repeating and attempting to falsify explanations put forward in particular pieces of research. There is in other words an element to the responsiveness and reflexiveness of the peer review community that is absent from peer review dialogue in educational research. (The downplaying of the systematic engagement in the work of others is perhaps accentuated by research management processes such as the RAE – the latter with a specific emphasis on 'originality', which actively discourages researchers to engage in the repetition of others' work.)

The additional work of the broad research community in those STEM subjects – attempting to falsify, to test alternative hypotheses and/or to replicate – is important for the process of developing what Ryle

(1949/1990) calls an 'inference ticket', of seeking alternative explanations for the phenomena encountered or 'discovered' in educational research. Its significance is in both the routine replication of experimental work and in the 'plausibility' that Hammersley (1992: 70) suggests is one of the criteria for assessing the validity of qualitative work. Ultimately it is through post hoc processes such as these that quality is assured.

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'Working Class Students, Higher Education and the Challenges of Gaining Access': From Methodological to Substantive Issues

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Introduction

Accessing participants in qualitative research is often one of the most difficult aspects of the research process. It is also one of the least written about in research methodology. In our research project: The socio-cultural and learning experiences of working class students in Higher Education (ESRC grant ref:RES-139-25-0208, (with Diane Reay and Lori Colliander, University of Cambridge), accessing students has been particularly difficult; given the main focus is on working class students, this fact takes on a certain poignancy. However, adopting a reflective approach to the access process we were able to capitalise on the challenges we were confronted with. In so doing we have been able to demonstrate that this is not merely a mechanical, albeit necessary, research task but in fact this process enabled us to gain insights into: the structure and organisation and systems of the institutions involved; and the attitudes of the heads of department, tutors and admissions tutors, all personnel who are key to the learning experiences of the students we are researching. Their display of a range of attitudes, towards us as 'outsiders', alerted us to think about the students' own first impressions, and the kinds of reception they encountered on first going to university. Also, significantly, it has raised issues about institutional monitoring of working class student admissions and the institutions' widening participation strategy and policy in particular.

Methodological challenges

There are four HEIs in our research project. Three universities: one high status, Southern, one pre-1992 university, Midlands, and one post 1992 university, Northern, and a

college of FE, Eastern College, where we are researching students on Foundation Degrees. We are focusing on three to six different subject departments in each of the universities and three in the FE College and students in years 1 and 2 (or were when we started but are now in years 2 and 3). The subjects are History, Law, Chemistry, Engineering, Economics and English in the universities, and Early Childhood Studies, Performing Arts and Arboriculture in the College.

Although we are specifically interested in the socio-cultural and learning experiences of working class students we wanted to place these within a broader context of a range of students' experience. Therefore, we began the research by seeking the views on the HE experience of a cross-section of students in a range of subjects in years 1 and 2, by means of a questionnaire which we distributed in lectures, lab sessions and on-line. We followed this up with group interviews and one-to-one interviews and then identified a minimum of six working class students in each institution for longitudinal (across two academic years) case study work.

In terms of fulfilling our data collection plans and negotiating participation with interviewees and case study students we managed to do this. However, we have had to make changes including expanding the number of subjects we wanted to focus on; not always being able to focus on the same subjects across the three universities; not always being able to carry out group interviews and having to carry out one-to-one interviews instead. Also we have a gender imbalance, (with mainly women) in some institutions,

in some subjects and few minority ethnic students. Our access therefore has not only been challenging but has also resulted in a set of students and subjects that were not entirely what we had originally wanted.

In order to access our case study students, we initially hoped that the questionnaire would elicit sufficient numbers of suitable volunteers. However it was clear in these early stages that the numbers of working class students were not high, particularly in Southern University and Midlands University and also few of these students were willing to participate further in the project. We therefore had to adopt a number of other tactics including a second round of on-line questionnaires; requests posted on university websites, e-learning sites, student union websites; posters and through staff contacts. Once contact had been made with these students the issue of maintaining this contact and establishing a relationship with us as researchers remained. For instance a number of those we initially identified as case study students did not reply following their first interview in an anticipated series of four interviews. For those students that have continued to assist us throughout the project we have had to work at maintaining these links via e-mails, chance encounters and occasional telephone conversations and text messages.

University monitoring of widening participation

Following the initial challenges to gaining access to the subject areas, it became apparent that university monitoring of the backgrounds of their students was problematic. We

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have found, as Quinn *et al* (2005) also did, that university student data are frequently inaccurate, definitions of social class are vague and devices for collecting such data are inadequate. We found that tutors including a Widening Participation Officer had little idea of the nature of the student body, or at least held views based more on assumptions or impressions than statistical data. At Northern University and at Eastern College there is an assumption that the majority of the students are working class. But this is not in fact the case according to HESA data which indicates that at Northern 39.5% (2004/05) are identified as working class, and the FE College held no data on the social class composition of their students.

Institutional and disciplinary habitus

Gaining initial entry to the HEIs was not difficult in itself but subsequent negotiations to certain disciplines in certain institutions were challenging and often unfruitful. As with all qualitative research we had to negotiate access at different levels for different purposes as already indicated, involving a range of personnel.

The responses varied across disciplines within as well as between institutions. Whilst Northern University (a post-1992 university) was the most approachable, Midlands and Southern Universities (pre-1992 and 'high status' respectively) varied from discipline to discipline. We are not suggesting a neat correspondence between status of institution or subject and type of response to our request. However, we are aware of indications of subject status, ethos and thus field and habitus (Bourdieu 1990), all of which have an impact on the students at the point of admission and throughout their university experience.

The subject of Law for example gave rise to a mixed response. There was openness and willingness for us to access students, and the support to do this, at Northern University; at Southern the re-

sponse was polite but there was limited facilitation to access students; at the other end of the spectrum at Midlands University there was outright resistance at first from the head of department and from one tutor in particular. Objectively Law represents a high status profession and thus a high status subject area. At Midlands, in particular, Law is regarded as high status and has a significant national and international reputation. It is also one of the largest subject areas (with over 800 students in 2004-2005) in the University. Students need 340 points to get in compared with 240 in Chemistry, and 300/320 History at the same university (and 220 at Northern and 360 at Southern).

The responses to us from the Subject departments led us to reflect on whether these kinds of attitudes are mirrored in staff-student relationships, in terms of, for example, engendering a sense of knowing your place; a sense of distancing as Bourdieu (1986) has described it within the pedagogic relationship. Or is it more a display of their sense of themselves as a powerful and important department/subject/profession and therefore an attitude they want to engender in their students?

Subject choice and subject hierarchies

Prior to the research we were aware, of course, of subject hierarchies and the role these play in maintaining social differentiation, and that working class students tended to access vocationally related subjects (Bowl 2003:65-66), together with the fact that there are many fewer working class students the more high status the institution (Sutton Trust 2006). However, we didn't anticipate finding working class students to be quite so difficult. We expected or perhaps hoped, to find more working class students undertaking academic subjects than we have; this has been a particular issue for us at Southern where only 8% of History students, and 14% of Law students in 04-05 are deemed to be from working class backgrounds (HESA SEC 4

7); the national average is 20.5% and 28.6% respectively.

Research has shown (Bowl *ibid*, Preece 1999, Leathwood 2003) that motivations for subject choice for working class students are strongly related to economic factors as well as a desire for greater fulfilment, 'knowing and wanting to prove that they can do it' and although we do have working class students who are studying because they are passionate about their subject, this issue and the apparently relatively small number of working class students we have found studying the more academic subjects, has made us reflect on questions about entitlement and opportunity and issues of belonging or not, as found in studies of choice (Reay *et al* 2005, Ball *et al* 2000).

Whilst we do not seek to diminish the advances in respect of Widening Participation and the opportunities it has ensured for local, disadvantaged communities, we point to an enduring absence of 'real choice' for working class people in respect of higher education. Subject hierarchies as a device for maintaining social differentiation (Bourdieu 1988:7), are also underpinned by unequal power relations. So the significance of knowledge comes more to the fore than we had originally anticipated especially in relation to students' subject 'choices', and factors that may have empowered and led to self-determination to break the mould, or not, are issues to be explored.

Student availability: time rich/ time poor

A key level of access is of course in relation to the students themselves. Whilst we knew that time would be a major issue for tutors we hadn't really thought that it would be such an issue for the students too. The intensification of teaching and studying became very apparent through the access process. There is huge pressure on the tutors to complete the syllabus within a relatively short time frame and for the students in terms of getting the course work done. Student limited

availability as well as tutor unwillingness to share some of this precious time with us has impacted on the access process but it also alerted us to the temporal dimensions of student life and the ways the institutions organised their learning programmes.

Students seem to spend limited amounts of time at the university, to varying degrees across the different institutions. At Southern University term times are only 8 weeks; at the other two universities although term times are seemingly longer, teaching time is shorter than the length of the term – in the summer term for instance teaching seemed to finish by the end of May in some cases. Exams took place in May/June and then the students left for vacation. However, even into May some students hadn't returned from their Easter vacation and when they did there was almost no teaching, especially for 3rd years.

Moreover, many of the students are time poor for different reasons across the institutions. These include the amount of time they spend doing paid work and whether they are based in/around the university; and whether they have family or other domestic commitments. There are clear differences between working class and middle class students and mature/younger students in these respects.

There are also significant differences between the universities. First year students at Southern University, for example, have to live in University accommodation and no students are allowed to take jobs during term time (or at least are not supposed to). The strongly 'classified' (in Bernstein's terms, 1996) structure of this University means that the students are on campus, attending lectures and tutorials; these students because of the academic expectations on them and the resulting acculturation are highly focused and have to work intensively. At Northern University the students are rarely on campus outside of teaching contact time because they tend to live at home or

off campus; they are more likely to have part-time (and in some cases almost full-time) jobs and generally appear to be somewhat disassociated from university life in general. The situation and experiences of students at Midlands University lies somewhere in between. They tend to live in halls or rented accommodation near to the University campus; they appear to be busy with their courses but also are fairly heavily engaged with the social aspects of university life too. With respect to the FE students, most are studying part-time and often have full time jobs and family commitments and are mature students.

There are also differences between subjects some requiring more intensive on-going commitment than others. The Performing Arts students at Eastern College, whilst studying full-time, are engaged in performance related activities in any 'spare' time they have. Students at Southern University have to prepare weekly for their one-to-one or small group tutorials as do Law students at Midlands, and Chemistry students at Midlands appear to have a much more congested timetable than many other degree programmes. All of these structural and organisational factors are influencing the student experience, as well in some respects, our access.

Summary

Whilst the process of accessing student participants across the range of class and ethnic groups has been challenging we have accessed sufficient students to address the aims of the study, even though those students and the way we have collected/are collecting their stories was not absolutely, entirely as we planned. But probably the most important aspect of the process is the reflective element through which we enhanced our research questions and through which we were alerted to a number of issues critical to an examination of the HE student experience in the context of widening participation.

To summarise, these include: subject/disciplinary, sub-culture/habitus;

the status and expectations of the discipline; the relation between subject and society and the influence on the students' learning experience and sense of themselves; the issue of institutional monitoring of widening participation and 'non-traditional entrants'; and time poor students and the implications of this.

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Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches to Research: A Case study examining the analysis of children's essays

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Over the past two decades there has been an increased interest in conducting research that combines qualitative and quantitative methods (Brannen 1992, Elliott 2005, Tashakkori 1998, Cresswell 2007). However as a number of authors have highlighted there are still relatively few research projects that maintain a balance between qualitative and quantitative approaches. Whether this is due to the expertise of particular researchers or the demands of specific journals, it is more usual for either quantitative or qualitative evidence to be given precedence. In addition, while there is a substantial literature on the epistemologies that underpin qualitative and quantitative approaches there is still relatively little attention focused on the *ontological* implications of adopting a qualitative or quantitative approach. As I have argued in more detail elsewhere, whereas qualitative approaches to research allow for an examination of how individuals construct, maintain and reinforce their own sense of identity, quantitative approaches, with their focus on attributes or variables, almost inevitably treat elements of identity as fixed over time (Elliott 2002, 2005). This article has two main aims, first to explore the tensions between adopting a qualitative and quantitative approach to research. This is achieved by briefly discussing the analysis of a large sample of children's essays that were written by eleven-year-olds in 1969 on the topic *'Imagine you are now 25 years old. Write about the life you are leading, your interests, your home life and your work at the age of 25'*. Second, to make researchers in the field of education aware of the availability of this fascinating new archive of data that is available for further analysis.

The essays that form the focus of this article were written as part of the 1958 British birth cohort study, known as the National Child Development Study (NCDS). There were over 17,000 children in this birth cohort in Great Britain, all of whom were born in a particular week of 1958. The mothers were interviewed by midwives very soon after the child's birth and then the cohort members themselves were followed up at ages 7, 11, 16, 23, 33, 42 and 46 years. Detailed information has been collected on a wide range of topic areas, including early development, physical and mental health, cognitive ability, education, demographic circumstances, employment, and housing (for further details about the study see Fogelman 1976, Ferri *et al* 1993, 2003). The majority of the research carried out using data from the NCDS is quantitative in nature with researchers estimating models in order to understand more about the links between early life circumstances and outcomes in later life. However there are some examples of qualitative material that has also been collected as part of the study.

Of the children who participated in the age 11 sweep of the NCDS a total of 13,669 completed an essay about their imagined life at age 25. The majority of children in the study completed the essays while they were in their last few months of junior school between April and June 1969. Further details of the context in which the essays were written are provided in Elliott and Morrow (2007). To date, these essays have not been fully coded or analysed for use with the other data collected in the study. Copies of the original essays (i.e. in the child's handwriting

and with original spelling and punctuation) have been stored on microfiche and archived at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies. Some preliminary coding of the occupational aspirations of cohort members was carried out and archived together with the other quantitative data collected at age 11 during the 1970s, but this is the only aspect of the rich material contained in the essays that has been available to researchers.

In many ways these essays provide the perfect exemplar for a project that aims to combine qualitative and quantitative methods. First there are a large number of essays, over 13,000 in all, and they were written by a broadly representative sample of children from across Great Britain. Second the essays contain a great deal of very rich qualitative textual data. On average each essay is just under 200 words long and has been shaped by the specific way in which the child chose to interpret the instruction to *'Imagine you are 25 years old...'*. Analysis of the essays could therefore focus on the content or the form of the children's writing. Given the number of essays available for analysis one approach, which draws primarily from the quantitative tradition, is to code the essays according to the themes that the children write about. As part of a pilot project, funded by the Nuffield foundation, a simple coding frame was developed by close reading of fifty essays. We identified which topics and themes emerged most frequently and a list of twenty eight separate codes was compiled (Elliott and Morrow 2007). This coding frame was then applied to a sub-sample of 500 essays. It revealed some clear differences between the topics written about by

boys and girls. Almost all the children had followed the researchers' instructions to write about their imagined future home life and their work at age twenty five. However, boys were more likely than girls to write in detail about the skills and activities involved in their chosen occupation (46% vs. 32%), and girls were more likely than boys to write about the occupation of their imagined future husband/wife (23% vs. 10%). In addition, boys were much more likely than girls to write about football (39% vs. 2%) and girls were much more likely than boys to write about domestic labour, such as cooking and cleaning (55% vs. 22%). This method of coding and analyzing the essays could be understood as a way of combining qualitative and quantitative methods in that the coding of the essays was based on an inductive qualitative approach. The key themes were allowed to emerge from the children's writing rather than being imposed by the researcher. However, by reducing each essay to a set of codes that can be entered into a spreadsheet or rectangular dataset a great deal is lost. This method arguably sits more comfortably within the quantitative tradition than the qualitative tradition. Once the essays have been coded data from them can be analysed in conjunction with other variables and the focus is on comparisons of different groups.

For example, if we look at the extracts from two of the girls essays, reproduced below, we can see that in both of these cases the essay would have been coded as including information about the imagined husband's occupation. However, this is where the similarity ends. While one girl uses her husband's occupation to indicate their parallel interests and their companionate relationship, in the second extract the girl emphasizes the complementarity of her husband's occupation and her own role as a housewife at home. In the first extract it could be argued that the girl is attempting to do gender differently. She does not simply state that she wants to be a vet but demonstrates a clear understanding

of the pathway she must follow in order to achieve her desired occupation. She also combines wanting a professional occupation with an imagined family life – at age twenty five she expects to be married with a child as well as sharing a private veterinary practice with her husband.

'When I was in the fourth year of my Grammar school I dropped all subjects except English, zoology and Biology. Then I studied as a vet. I am now a vet, I'm married with one child. My husband is also a vet, we work together. Our garage is used as a surgery and a shed as a waiting room.'

My name is [firstname surname] but my married name is Clark. I have 2 children, a girl called Johanne and a boy called Peter. Peter is 2 yrs old and Johanne is 6 month old. I have a budgie and a dog. I called the budgie after my husband John. The dog is a spaniel and is black and white, his name is shag – because he is shaggy. I don't go to work but my husband is a civil engineer and he gets £28 10s a week

In contrast to a quantitative approach, which could be used to examine the differences between the topics written about by boys and girls in the sample, a qualitative approach to analysis allows for an understanding of the essays as a reflection of the children's attempt to produce a narratively coherent identity (Ezzy 1998). The focus then shifts from understanding gender as a fixed attribute of each child, to exploring the ways in which children themselves use gender as a resource to structure an account of their imagined future lives. A qualitative approach therefore potentially acknowledges the reflexive nature of the self, with an emphasis on the fact that children should be understood as active in the construction and determination of their own *gendered* identities rather than as pas-

sive subjects of social structures and processes. This has resonances with the 'new sociology of childhood' (James and Prout, 1990). The implication is that rather than accepting gender as a natural or self-evident feature of children's lives we need to develop an understanding of how children themselves use and reproduce the category of gender. Instead of understanding children's development towards adulthood as involving their acceptance of the norms and roles within the adult world the focus shifts towards understanding the part that children themselves play in creating their social worlds, albeit using resources that are available to them based on existing social structures and gender arrangements.

A qualitative analysis of the way that gender structures these children's essays, or of how children create and reinforce a gendered identity for themselves within the essays is perhaps more demanding than the more quantitative coding exercise described above. Unsurprisingly, the children do not explicitly write about gender in their essays. There were no phrases of the form 'Because I am a girl I will be responsible for childcare' or 'I will be the main breadwinner because I am a boy'. Rather a qualitative approach demands the use of diverse analytic strategies that allow for the identification of the ways that children are using the concept of gender to complete the task of imagining their life at twenty-five. This is particularly challenging when there is a large sample of essays or other textual material available for analysis.

It is hoped that this brief discussion of two approaches to the analysis of children's essays has demonstrated that the choice between adopting a predominantly qualitative or quantitative approach to analysis is not simply a technical or practical issue but can also have implications for the ways in which we might conceptualise individual attributes and identities. Whereas the focus in quantitative analysis, on variables such as gender or age, leads to

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analysis that makes comparisons between groups, qualitative analysis has the potential to raise questions about how these groupings are understood by the individuals involved. This also opens up the possibility of understanding individuals as active agents who are continually involved in shaping and reaffirming their own sense of identity.

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Further details about the National Child Development Study can be found on the website of the Centre for Longitudinal Studies:

<http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/>

The sample of 500 children's essays that are discussed in this article have been transcribed and are due to be available in the UK Data Archive at the University of Essex by December 2007. Further details of the holdings of the Data Archive can be found at:

<http://www.esds.ac.uk/>

Identifying the Research Needs in Research Methods in the UK Social Sciences

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The perceived shortfall in research methods skills, expertise and methodological development in the UK social sciences, particularly in relation to quantitative research methods, has been a concern of the ESRC for some time. This concern has resulted in the commissioning of a range of consultation exercises

and considerable investments in research methods training, development and support for research (e.g., the Analysis of Large and Complex Datasets Programme (ALCD), the Research Methods Programme (RMP), National Centre for e-Social Science (NCeSS), NCRM and the Researcher Development Initiative

(RDI)). The context for these developments has been identified as:

- A recognition that British Universities are not producing suitably skilled social scientists (especially in relation to quantitative methods) of sufficient quality and in sufficient numbers

to meet the needs of academia and the public (especially Government) and private sectors;

- Significant developments in IT and computing power which offer opportunities to develop new methodological tools and techniques;
- A growth in the number, size, complexity and types of datasets available, both qualitative and quantitative, which offers new opportunities for analysis and data linkage;
- A recognition that the UK needs to retain its position of international excellence and to satisfy the needs of a knowledge-based economy and society.

The ESRC National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) was established in April 2004 to enhance the range and quality of research methods used by the social science community. One of the objectives of NCRM is to assess current national provision and national needs in research methods and training through consultation with key stakeholders.

The ESRC asked NCRM to undertake a consultation exercise to identify the needs for research in research methods in the social science community. It was not intended that this would be a comprehensive analysis of the actual methodological research needs of the social science community but rather a consultation with a limited number of key stakeholders to identify their views on the methodological challenges for social research which further research could usefully address. The aim was thus to provide an overview of *perceived* needs for research rather than a substantive analysis. The format for the review was agreed with the ESRC in January 2006.

Findings: Topics identified

Thirteen topics were identified with each one comprising a number of issues. Four topics were prominent in participants' responses: evalua-

tion methods, comparative research, mixed methods and data linkage. Of these, mixed methods and comparative research, were not entirely respondent-generated in that the ESRC asked us to explore the needs for research in these areas with respondents. Nevertheless, these two areas were frequently discussed without prompting and where prompting occurred they were generally identified as important topics.

We now outline each topic and the issues relevant to it, commencing with the four topics identified most prominently; the others are not listed in any order of priority.

1. Policy evaluation

- Research into trials in a social context, integration of quantitative and qualitative analysis, unconventional methods including realistic evaluation, action research, and observational studies;
- The development of community involvement techniques that both inform and elicit views, and techniques for exploration of attitudes, including commercial methods, and methods for hard to reach groups.

These methods are seen as important given the recent emphasis on evidence-based policy and a perception that unconventional methods are under-utilised.

2. Comparative research

- Methods for question translation and mode effects, and the implications of differing sampling methods and response rates;
- Techniques for radical cross-cultural comparisons;
- Research into analysis of area or country effects, such as logic-based methods.

Comparative work is a requirement of the policy community and is seen as increasingly important as a consequence of globalisation.

3. Mixed methods

- How to achieve integration not juxtaposition of methods, especially across quantitative and qualitative analysis, in single studies;
- Research on integration of quantitative and qualitative datasets.

Mixed methods are seen as key to policy evaluation and for deeper understanding of research outcomes more generally.

4. Data linkage

- Exploring the potential of linking to administrative data, better analysis of statistical properties of linked data and exploration of specific omissions from linked data;
- Research into the quality of administrative data, and comparative work to assess potential for linking to specific datasets from surveys.

Linkage has huge but unexplored potential to expand datasets.

5. Qualitative data collection and analysis

- Concerning collection, context effects in and replicability of interviews, effects and opportunities of new modes of data collection afforded by technology; development of methods to handle data from online sources ('blogs,' chatrooms, email and so on); research to explore the potential for rigorous visual methods;
- Concerning analysis, development of tools for text mining, and computing resources to 'scale-up' qualitative research; exploration of the replicability of interview analysis and geographical generalisability of qualitative research.

Topics concerning collection are seen as important because of the pace of technological change and concerning analysis because, inter alia, of the contribution of qualitative

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research to policy work.

6. Survey methods

- Research to identify and explain mode effects in data collection, including new modes such as online panels and PDAs, and to produce a typology of question portability across modes. Also to address portability through research on question design. These are seen as important because of perceived difficulties of traditional methods and availability (or temptations) of new technologies;
- Research to explain, counteract and account for falling response rates; exploration of the relationship between non-response rates and bias.

7. Longitudinal methods and spatial analysis

- Development of longitudinal methods for social science data, including event history analysis and multilevel modelling, its extension to further data types including multiple time series and spatio-temporal data;
- Exploration of event sequencing, social change and of spatio-temporal simulation;
- Improved methods for handling spatial auto-correlation, scale issues and estimating distributions of small area statistics;
- Longitudinal simulation as a key input to policy analysis.

8. Research synthesis

- Methods to control for social context and to explore relationships between reviewer's choice of methods and outcomes of narrative reviews;
- Development of synthesis methods for qualitative research.

9. Software and technological developments

- Improvements in text mining techniques and tools needed for the analysis of visual data, plus

more reliable software for annotating streaming digital footage;

- Software that enables easier switching between data handling and analysis;
- Improved data visualisation tools;
- Developments in computing to match increasing data availability;
- Research to explore the validity of algorithms to 'quantitise' qualitative data.

10. Agent-based social simulation (ABSS)

- Research to explore abstract model- versus evidence-initiated approaches, whether numerical or linguistic representations of qualitative phenomena are appropriate, and whether achievements and outputs of ABSS offer lessons for social science generally.

Practitioners see ABSS as an innovative approach to social science with integrative and interdisciplinary potential, in conflict with conventional methods.

11. Interdisciplinary research

- New models needed of collaborative working across between disciplines;
- Research to determine and demonstrate improvements over mono-disciplinarity.

These developments are seen as necessary both within social sciences and in conjunction with natural sciences, and are seen as important partly because many policy issues are so multifaceted.

12. Research practice, innovation, teaching and learning

- Research to identify best practice by synthesis and evaluation of frontier research in numerous technical topics;
- Research on the process of methodological innovation itself;
- Research to identify the most effective forms of teaching of research methods in areas in

which the UK has a skills gap.

Research in some of these areas is thought to offer high impact compared to concentration on frontier research alone.

13. Substantive issues

Specific substantive areas identified included:

- genomics and the social impacts of new technologies;
- environmental change; globalisation;
- new forms of social interaction;
- family research;
- researching emotional and sensory life.

Research by multidisciplinary teams on these topics is a likely means of methodological advance.

Conclusions

This report has identified thirteen areas where methodological research is believed to be needed by members of the social science research community, broadly-conceived. Four of these emerged as particularly prominent themes: data linkage, policy evaluation, mixed methods and comparative research. Readers should bear in mind though, that the ESRC requested that special attention be given to the last two topics. The other broad priority areas were, in no order of priority, interdisciplinary research, qualitative data collection and analysis, survey methods, longitudinal and spatial analysis, research synthesis, software and technological development, agent-based social simulation, innovation, research practice, teaching and learning and substantive topics.

The thirteen broad topics are mostly reiterative of needs identified in the earlier consultation exercises mentioned at the start of this report. There appear to be two exception to this general picture, under the heading of 'Research Practice, Innovation and Teaching and Learning' and 'Agent-Based Social Simulation' (ABSS).

The main contribution of this report is therefore to flesh out some current perspectives on the key needs and opportunities under each heading, which could be targeted for research and development. We have also explored reasons people gave why these might be seen as priorities. In comparison to previous reports for ESRC on research methods, the current report is distinctive for its breadth of coverage and consultation, with opportunities for response at the draft stage targeted at research centres and learned societies, plus an open-response opportunity offered via the NCRM website. Responses to the draft stage have, wherever possible, been incorporated into the main text.

Comparisons with previous reports provide some evidence that needs and priorities are changing, and that this report has picked up on certain emphases emerging in the 21st century within the broad topic areas. This seems particularly evident in, for examples, the renewed interest in trial-type techniques in policy evaluation, the interest in use of administrative data via data linkage, and interest in responsive design in

survey methods.

Inevitably such a broad consultation procedure has produced a very diverse range of responses. Incorporating these into a coherent report has therefore been a challenging exercise. We have favoured inclusivity over forcing a particular structure on the set of responses. The results should therefore be seen primarily as a resource to be drawn on rather than a distillation of the diverse views into a definitive answer to the question of 'what the social science community views the priorities to be.'

It may not be the case that needs can always be met and this may explain why some of the same themes recur in different consultations, but we have sought to focus on needs that might usefully be addressed by research. Further, some needs are more like opportunities, for example, opportunities to exploit new types of data such as linked administrative data. The report is not intended as a specification for a call for research by ESRC. However, we are optimistic that it might serve as a resource that can be re-

ferred to in a call, or could provide a basis for further scoping by the research council in developing a call for a specific methodological initiative.

Finally, as the contents of the report reflect, our consultees often desired to emphasise the importance of dissemination, training and capacity-building. We take this to reflect the intimate relationship between these and research, and consequently the value of developing them in tandem with methodological research. A report on the needs for training in research methods in the UK social science community has recently been produced by NCRM (Wiles *et al* 2005).

The full NCRM report on identifying the research needs in research methods in UK social science can be found on the NCRM website

www.ncrm.ac.uk

TLRP New Career Researchers Conference 2007

John Clayton

University of Sunderland

On February 27th 2007 the TLRP invited new career researchers involved with the programme's various investments (including myself) to attend a two day capacity building conference at the Marriot Hotel in Bristol. During the course of the two days, organised by Dr. Chris Taylor of Cardiff University, we were involved with a range of informative but also very practical sessions, which for those of us at an early and important stage in our careers in educational research was very welcome. Whilst focussed and structured, the format of the conference was also very friendly and informal, providing a valuable opportunity to socialise and discuss experiences and thoughts with the participants from a range of higher education institutions.

The conference programme was broken up into a number of plenary and workshop sessions taken by academics closely involved with the TLRP and working through a variety of institutions, who offered the benefit of their

expertise and experience. All conference participants were invited to attend the plenary sessions which covered topics including the ESRC demographic review, RCUK and BERA research staff concordats, ESRC career development funding, and the 2007 RAE, which were delivered in a relaxed and open style allowing for questions from the floor. The two workshop sessions, one on each of the two days, then offered participants the choice of attending concurrent sessions on 'Presenting research findings' or 'Getting published' and 'How to peer review journal articles' or 'Writing grant applications'. These interactive sessions enabled participants to advance their own understanding of the practicalities of 'doing research' and allowed an opportunity to air any burning questions in relation to these specific topics. The consensus seemed to be that was a valuable and useful gathering and a good opportunity to meet with TLRP colleagues.

Building Research Capacity

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Views expressed in this journal do not necessarily reflect those of the University, the Teaching and Learning Research Programme, or the Economic and Social Research Council.

TLRP News

Research on Technology Enhanced Learning — Understanding, creating, and exploiting digital technologies for learning

Outline applications are invited under the second call of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme's Technology Enhanced Learning Phase (TLRP TEL). The aim of the call is to support innovative interdisciplinary research collaborations focusing on the creation, development and exploitation of digital technologies for learning through a better understanding of their capability to transform the quality of learning experiences and lead to enhancements in learning outcomes. Proposals addressing 4 key research challenges on technology enhanced learning -Productivity, Personalisation, Inclusion and Flexibility – are sought. This £6m second call is being funded by the ESRC and EPSRC, in partnership with the e-Science Core Programme, JISC and Becta.

For full details of the Call please visit the TLRP website: www.tlrp.org

TLRP Research Methods conference

26 November 2007

In place of an annual general TLRP conference in 2007 numerous smaller sectoral and thematic events will be held. This event will be held in Cardiff and will focus on thematic work on research methods. For further details about the conference please visit the TLRP website.

Other News

2007 BERA Annual Conference

5th - 8th September 2007

The 2007 BERA Conference will take place at the Institute of Education in London on 5th-8th September 2007. Full details can be found on the conference website:

<http://www.beraconference.co.uk/>

NCRM and RDI Events

Second Annual Conference, Randomised-Controlled Trials in Social Science: The way forward

12th-14th September 2007, University of York

Following the success of the inaugural conference - RCTs in the Social Sciences: Challenges and prospects, we are pleased to announce the second annual conference addressing the theme RCTs in the social sciences: The way forward. The conference will be an opportunity for delegates to share expertise, interests, and concerns about conducting trials in all fields of public policy. For more information please visit:

<http://www.trials-pp.co.uk/>

Multilevel Discrete-time Event History Analysis Workshop

13th - 4th September 2007, University of Bristol

This workshop will introduce discrete-time methods for the analysis of event history data, i.e. data on the timing of events such as changes in marital or employment status. Advanced topics such as modelling transitions between multiple states and correlated event histories will also be discussed. The emphasis will be on applying these methods in practice and interpreting the results.

For more information please visit:

<http://www.cmm.bristol.ac.uk/>

Methodological challenges of using participatory methods

21st September 2007, University of Leeds

This workshop will investigate the challenges of using participatory approaches in social science research and interrogate areas including: the role of participants as users of research; the strong internal validity of the findings from participatory research; addressing relationships of power. For more information please visit:

<http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk/>

For more information about these and other NCRM events please visit the NCRM website: www.ncrm.ac.uk or call +44 (0)23 8059 4539, or email: info@ncrm.ac.uk