

Tapping into a rich vein of research

I DECIDED to try and save time writing this column by using my super new laptop computer on the plane home from the United States and Canada. Unfortunately I was defeated not by the technology, which had sadly been the case while I was in the US but by the air hostess. I was travelling from Toronto on a Saturday night, but in our heads it was still only about 10pm. However, the air hostess informed me that my tapping-tapping was disturbing the other passengers who wanted to sleep. They had finished showing the film and drawn down the blinds for the night. Presumably my ability to type smoothly and rhythmically was insufficient to lull to sleep those passengers who wanted to. So I gave up and joined the sleepers for those couple of brief hours, and yet still find myself now suffering the effects of jet-lag.

I had taken the laptop with me in the hope that I would be able to amend and/or correct my talks and papers and have them printed out there, saving all the time and expense of the mail or fax system. As it turned out, despite the fact that I was using what I believed to be the most up-to-date American software on an IBM-compatible machine (made in Japan), the universities I happened to visit did not use this system. It also appeared to be too complex and time-consuming to convert my discs into their systems just to produce final versions of the papers.



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So, having made a valiant effort to bring myself into the 1990s world of international information technology for the sake of research, I found myself having schlepped a rather heavy and awkward bag thousands of miles for nothing! And to boot, I had been stopped in customs (which, for some curious reason, is rather customary for me!) at Logan international airport in Boston. This time, though, it turned out to be by a rather eager official who was a computer buff and wanted to examine the machine in detail, having of course

rummaged through my other bags first. I had also had to make massive efforts to avoid the security machines at all the various airports, with the computer, lest the magnetic system wiped off the software. All in all, the laptop turned out to be more of a burden than an asset, on this trip at least!

However, I am hoping that this is a teething problem. I have in fact acquired the machine for more long-term use and for my rather new research brief as both head of research in the reorganised school of legal, political and social sciences at South Bank University and as director of the newly established social sciences research centre.

Next week sees the public launch of this research centre by Robert Jackson, MP, the science minister. The centre has been set up initially with funds from the Polytechnic and Colleges Funding Council for research centres of excellence. These funds of about £90,000 per annum for the next three years are to be used for a series of specific but linked research studies and evaluations of user perspectives in the education, health and social services. Our aim is to compare and contrast different approaches to users as consumers and complainants, or providers and professionals in a number of policy settings and in an international, especially European, context.

We are taking as our starting point

the Citizen's Charter. It sets the basic rights for citizens in terms of a range of public and social services and provides the benchmark for the assessment of the quality of service provision.

Four research fellows have been appointed to conduct specific but inter-linked research projects. One is a continuation of a project originally funded by the Department of Health jointly with the PSSRU at the University of Kent, to evaluate the Landmark, a centre for people who are HIV positive or who already have AIDS. This follow-up study will look at the availability, accessibility and appropriateness of services for people living with HIV/AIDS in a locality in order to propose quality assurance mechanisms. Another builds upon a project initially funded by the Leverhulme Trust, jointly with the Centre for Educational Research at the LSE, to study parental choice of secondary school. Studies will be conducted of developments in parent-school relations through contacts, contracts and new complaints systems.

Yet a third builds upon work conducted at the National Children's Bureau to evaluate projects for lone parent and homeless families, funded under the Department of Health's new Under-Fives Initiative. A linked study will look at homeless families in private sector leased accommodation and focus on the typical 'homelessness pathway', the support, or lack of support provided

to families during transitions from the different types of accommodation before being permanently resettled.

Another set of studies will look at issues of redress in the public sector, starting with a study sponsored by the National Consumer Council, into what is known about grievance procedures in the public sector. An associated study analyses complaints handled by one community health council over a year and evaluates people's experiences of various complaints processes.

The research centre also provides an umbrella for all the research activities, of the academic staff in legal, political and social sciences and incorporates under its broad rubric a number of existing research activities such as the Health and Social Services research unit, the SIGMA research project to study the epidemiology of AIDS, and the Centre for Chinese Studies which also focuses upon third world development. Other individual and scholarly research studies, such as media studies, child care and development, ethnic and race relations, gender and women's studies are also encouraged and actively supported.

These are exciting times for such research development and it is just to be hoped that the new technologies will not waylay us unduly.

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