Designing research for improvement

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The guidance needs of disadvantaged groups are many and various, so ways of responding to them are unsurprisingly varied too. The diversity of clients and the organisations that work with them is reflected in the pages of this journal, as are the differing perspectives of the providers, the clients and the practitioners. The editors have provided the unusual opportunity to set out the wider context of a research project designed explicitly to influence the practical and political world. The nature of this design process is the subject of this article.

The fundamental proposition is that for research-based evidence to contribute effectively to the improvement of public services, the core research activity needs to be seen as part of a more embracing overall project. This wider project involves both the build-up to the research and the impact activity that surrounds it. For better or worse, these elements of a project are as likely to affect its influence in the world as the quality of the research at its core.

Recently the question of how people actually respond to evidence has itself become a topic of research (Nutley *et al.*, 2007: 319; Morris *et al.*, 2007). The evidence suggests that knowledge tends to move across communities in actively driven ways, rather than passive ones. By engaging with people in the communities for which the knowledge is intended it is more likely that useable knowledge will be created; from the social process of interacting with them it is more likely that the findings will be taken up. Mere publication and presentation have limited effect. In practical terms, projects need to be designed around the entire process in which a research investigation is embedded, including the way in which resources are mobilised and communities engaged before an investigation begins and the way in which communities are engaged with the outcomes afterwards.

So how did this project about careers guidance for disadvantaged groups set about acting on these principles? How did this particular project work as a case study in project design and implementation?

The planning phase[1]

Identifying issues and funders

The first and most fundamental step is to engage organisations with funds and resources to support a project. Identifying and defining interests in this is crucial. In this case, two organisations were found to have complementary interests and were brought together through a broker familiar with both. The Centre for Skills Development at City and Guilds (CSD) had identified careers guidance as a recurring issue in much of its work – it saw effective careers guidance as being a major issue for effective vocational education and training. CfBT Education Trust was involved in both careers guidance services and in work with disadvantaged groups and was researching aspects of both. It was significant that both organisations had *a priori* reasons to believe that the issues were important and that the knowledge base needed strengthening. Agreement was reached to work together and to focus on their common interest in careers guidance for groups at a disadvantage in the labour market.

The next issue is to work out and agree upon on a method of collaboration. The advantages of collaboration are that the total resources available are multiplied and that complementary capabilities can be brought to bear. However, in practice, collaborative action can be time-consuming and conflictive. The importance of brokerage (between both organisations and individuals) in facilitating this has been highlighted in recent conferences and studies, notably through the OECD (2007). In this project, explicit project management methods were agreed upon and used, including the creation of a joint board, a unique project manager and various protocols for management and communication.

In order to define carefully the questions and objectives that would shape the project an initial scoping study was commissioned to survey the state of existing knowledge. In the words of the author this was intended to 'inform decisions on which topics to focus on, which organisations to consult and which organisations to keep informed' (Gutherson, 2008). It enabled the project to build on previous work and to identify the range of disadvantages to be considered. Obvious though the need for this step is, it is all too frequently ignored.

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[1] The structure for the following sections is based on Morris (2002): 8.

Key points about this stage of the process were:

- the interests of funders were clearly and precisely defined and respected

- previous knowledge was sought out and built upon in the project specification

- potential stakeholder groups were identified

- intermediaries were found and used to help with brokerage and communication between the main players.

Specifying the research

Clear, detailed and comprehensive specification is a hallmark of effective projects. A good starting point is to work out the kinds of outcomes the funders are interested in (in distinction to the actual outcomes, yet to be discovered). In this case the board discussed and agreed upon several. They wanted to:

- illuminate an area that is inherently complex – there are many types of disadvantage and many approaches to careers guidance

- help policymakers at a time of change by focusing on issues where knowledge and understanding were acknowledged as weak

- help organisations delivering guidance services by establishing some kind of conceptual framework and recommendations based on empirical evidence.

To satisfy all three interests the board decided on a case study approach, seeking out examples where practice was likely to be interesting and effective. The clear aim here was to provide policy developers and practice leaders with information they could make use of directly for improvement rather than, for example, survey-based information reporting on the state of the service, or an evaluative study in relation to a particular intervention. From these preliminary agreements on outcome and method a clear specification of objectives, scope, scale and resource requirements was made possible.

Key points about the specification stage were:

- subsequent confusion was minimised by discussing and agreeing the ultimate purposes of the project before tackling detailed processes and resource allocation

- the project's niche in the policy and practice contexts was specified as well as its locus in the academic literature

- methods were designed to suit explicitly stated outcomes and purposes - in this case, portraits and recommendations for practice and policy.

Designing for influence

To be influential the outcomes of a project need to be both sound and useful. So, expert attention needs to be given to both the scientific issues of method and to the communication and engagement issues of an impact strategy. To this end, complementary roles were defined for writers, web designers, event organisers and marketing people as well as for researchers, team leaders and a project manager. Clear distinctions were drawn between the roles of these various experts and collegial relations encouraged between them. Such relations can be hard to develop in practice however, and the sheer pace and spread of this project was a constraint in this case. An explicit strategy was drawn up for securing impact by engaging with a wide range of stakeholders. Experts in research and policy were brought in to advise on method, focus and personnel. Government officials were consulted on the kind of outcomes that would be helpful and ways of fitting them into the schedule of policy development. Researchers and consultants with practice backgrounds were engaged in establishing the sample, creating the research instruments and preparing the fieldwork. The involvement of many parties, with diverse kinds of expertise was vital in arriving at a sample that had the right mix of disadvantaged groups, regional variation and service delivery type, within the budget and timescale the funders could afford.

Key messages about designing for influence are:

- use teams rather than sets of individuals to get plurality of expertise

- use face-to-face workshops to encourage cross fertilisation

- develop the method, sample and instruments collaboratively to combine the perspectives of the researchers, funders, stakeholders and management team

- build impact strategies into the project specification

- engage stakeholders from an early stage to create a sense of commitment for later, when the outcomes become available.

The investigative phase

The investigation at the heart of this project - interviews with practitioners, managers and service users - is described in the other pages of this journal. Several aspects of the way the fieldwork was organised were important in achieving coherence and impact. Above all the use of a team approach, in which the various research consultants collaborated with one another and with the project managers, was vital to securing agreements on method, sampling and instrument design. Regular communications

meant that differing perspectives and interests were reconciled and differences in experience and knowledge were capitalised upon. This meant that the disputes and misunderstandings that frequently dog collaborative projects were headed off. It also enabled a creative approach to develop in responding to emerging issues. As a project progresses, new situations are inevitably encountered, opportunities arise and hindrances appear. These can be perceived, all too easily, as threats to the original agreed plan and result in undue adherence to procedure even when circumstances have changed. Better to take up the opportunity to learn as the project proceeds and to modify plans accordingly. In this project, for example, the balance in the sample between regional spread and richness of practice was adjusted in the light of experience, and changes to the schedule were agreed to accommodate, for example, the re-contracting of *nextstep* providers within the lifetime of the project.

A further feature of an impact-driven project is sensitivity to the giving of time and thought by the organisations providing the data. Sometimes perceived as merely the subjects of research, these organisations are of course also key to the interpretation of findings for practitioners and to the implementation of changes implied by the findings. So empathy in relation to the site visits, interviews and recording and interpretation of information is important.

Equally important is a forward-looking sense of the roles to be played in future stages of the project. In this case responsibilities for data collection, recording, analysis, authorship and publication of reports was discussed and agreed well in advance between the researchers, writers, project managers and funders' board so that potential conflicts and delays were averted. Particularly important is early planning of the intended publication structure, because decisions about ultimate communications will affect the way data are to be collected and analysed. In this case, for example, it was decided that detailed case study reports would be needed for specific types of audience as well as a general overview report for others. Organisations involved with a specific community – such as unemployed or homeless people – would want to know in some depth about guidance issues for their client group, whereas a body concerned with guidance policy in general would be more interested in common features arising from analysis across multiple client groups. The decision to publish cases studies called for website development and the need for an overview report with recommendations implied a substantial hardcopy publication aimed at decision-makers. Early communication decisions ensured that in-depth data were collected and that analysis took place at both case study and overview levels.

The key factors in the investigative phase that contribute to ultimate impact include:

- respect amongst all parties for the multiplicity of roles that need to be played over the entire process
- recognition of the importance of intermediary roles, connecting up the work of the separate actors
- regular internal communications, both virtual and face-to-face
- discussion prior to data collection about outputs and their formats
- an expectation that procedures may need to be modified as the project proceeds, in the light of experience and emerging findings.

The influencing phase

As the foregoing analysis has suggested, to be effective in influencing policy and practice, 'impact features' need to be designed into a project at all stages from the very beginning. The right people need to be engaged, the right issues addressed, the right methods used and so on. It is not sufficient to consider 'influencing' as simply a late stage in a linear process, following the research (Nutley *et al.*, 2007: 176-179). The metaphor of 'dissemination' - the spreading of the seeds - is quite inappropriate. It gives a misleading sense of what applicable knowledge is, what it can do and how it can do it. Influence comes about through the active efforts to combine different forms of knowledge and expertise in a variety of actual contexts. Some elements of this process are discussed below in relation to this project.

Interpreting

The first consideration is the recognition of interpretation as a stage in the process of using evidence, distinct from the analysis of data. Analysis is truly the researcher's province, but the process of identifying important patterns, features or commonalties may well need to involve a wider range of perspectives. The interpretation needs to be not only scientifically sound but also potentially useful for practice and policy. In this project, the interpretation process began with sharing of analyses amongst the various researchers and led on to sharing with the project managers and funders. To bring in the views of policymakers, practitioners and service leaders a whole day workshop was organised, structured to enable the various parties to consider their own perspective and to interact it with that of others. To enable this interpretive activity to influence the final outcomes of the project, a clear distinction had to be drawn between the report produced by the research team and the final publication destined for public use. The researchers' report was given to the workshop participants in advance and formed the basis for interpretive discussion. The final publication was carefully

modified by the authors to take account of material emerging from these discussions, without compromising the authenticity of the data analysis based on the case study visits. In practice, of course, several iterations of draft documents were needed involving many parties and this required time and sensitivity to differing points of view.

Beyond interpretation lies a further distinct stage, in which the implications of the findings for policy and practice are drawn out. Where these are for the benefit of particular communities it is vital that their detailed knowledge of the practical context influences the implication statements. It is all too common for research to be ignored because the implications have been drawn up by researchers alone and show too little understanding of the context of management, budget-setting, decision-making or change processes into which the implication statements will play. The time and resources spent in bringing together diverse groups of stakeholders in workshops for this purpose helps to enhance the ultimate influence. Rushing impatiently to publication or the next research project is the enemy of impact!

Key factors in the interpretative stages are:

- engaging with representatives of those to whom the project findings speak

- using face-to-face methods to bring differing perspectives to bear

- maintaining a provisional stance about publication decisions so that interpretations can influence the final product

- drawing out implications only when sufficient knowledge of the context is available to blend with the findings of the study.

Communicating

It barely needs saying that excellent communications are of the utmost importance in today's world! The issue for a research for policy and practice is to accept that a communications strategy is needed from the outset and that time and resources need to be allocated to it on a scale comparable to the investigation itself. This strategy needs planning and the engagement of all parties, much as the investigation itself does. As with any communication task, potential audiences and readerships need to be identified and approached. Appropriate channels need to be found and the controllers of these engaged through a communication plan. In general, a variety of channels and formats are needed to enable knowledge to be shared with a reasonable range of interested parties. The interests of channel controllers and network managers need to be understood so that areas of mutual interest may be found and exploited.

In the case of this project it was recognised at an early stage that interest might be anticipated from the organisations concerned with particular client groups, for which guidance was but one aspect of their work, and also from others concerned primarily with guidance, for which the specific client group was less important. It was also to be expected from policymakers in national government, local and regional authorities, specialist agencies and representative organisations, and from other countries within the UK and abroad. It was the heterogeneity of these audiences that led to a multi-stranded publication strategy. An easy-to-read overall report was produced with a concise writing style, bullet points, pull quotes and exemplar boxes that busy practitioners and policymakers might be expected to dip into, if not to read thoroughly. At the same time the rich detail of the case studies was preserved and made available as web downloads, with the specific client group audiences in mind. Hard copy was developed particularly for people rushing around on trains or skim-reading for five minutes and electronic versions made for wide circulation through electronic networks.

A strategy for contacting opinion formers, champions, network managers and change agents [22] For practices that support effective impact see (Nutley *et al.*, 2002: 41) is under continuous development and is likely to continue well after the immediate products of the study have been published. The success of this strategy will depend upon its capacity to identify the interest of different communities in making use of the evidence and in finding ways to establish interactions with them.

Key issues in effective communications include:

- initiating and developing a communication strategy that identifies key contacts and establishes approaches that serve the interests of each

- seeking two-way exchanges with potential users of the evidence that enable them to challenge it, play with it, feed back on it

- providing products and services that potential users can integrate into their normal ways of working.

Following through

All too often research finishes with a final report. Researchers and funders may be eager to move onto the next exciting project and people's patience may be exhausted in simply meeting the challenges of publication.

In this project the communication plan is being implemented at the time of writing. As it begins to bite it is hoped that organisations that find the reports useful will wish to engage further in exploring their implications. Workshops might be set up to discuss implications for local delivery or national policy. These may reflect the interests of client-specific organisations or of guidance professionals

in general in improving professional practice. Either way, the challenge is to find the resources and the will to follow through with actions after the original research has finished. One way to do this is for people reading the report themselves to engage in some form of follow-through 'action research' – to test out some of the recommendations in their particular context and to monitor what happens. Another way is for organisations to involve the original researchers and authors in workshops to tease out what might be done differently in the light of the evidence. A further way is for other organisations, not directly involved in the original study, to engage in spreading the word and to consider extending the scope of the original study to include new and different client groups. The instruments designed for this study could, in principle, be used again and again with new client groups.

And finally of course, the discussion of new ideas and knowledge inevitably throws up further questions. This cyclical nature of the discovery process enables understanding to grow over time. So the very questions thrown up by debating the current report could form the basis for further study. Records of discussions flowing from this project need to be kept and communicated to the original sponsors so that ideas for the next stage in understanding guidance for disadvantaged groups can be held and passed on to whomsoever takes up the baton!

Key points in following through include:

- considering different kinds of forward path:
    - deepening engagement with communities already contacted
    - finding new communities to broaden the spread and scope of the study
    - identifying where new knowledge leads us - new questions and new insights needed
- considering whether other funders might be interested in collaborating to exploit the messages to improve practice or develop understanding
- engaging with organisations, individual, funders and agencies that might build on the research work to sustain the accumulation of knowledge.

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