

Research politics: Some issues in conducting research for government as a client

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Researchers are guided by their ideological and ethical viewpoints when conducting research. Doing research for government challenges them to confront these ideals head-on. This article explores the uncertain terrain researchers sometimes have to negotiate when conducting research for government, and discusses relations between researchers and government officials. It considers the authors' approach in conducting research for a South African provincial government department in 2008/2009 and, based on that experience, analyses the politics underlying the research process. Despite the clear brief directing the research, they found that the study was never separated from the political environment in which it was conducted. The study goals shifted according to the shifting perspectives of the commissioning authority, causing tension between the researchers and the project management.

Keywords: Research, educational research, government research, research politics, South Africa

Introduction

Historical and political background

The strong relationship between government and the national research councils – the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), in particular – is not new (Fleisch, 1995; Chisholm, 2002; Chisholm & Morrow, 2007). Prior to 1994, the relationship between government and research councils was strong and, according to Webster (1991), the councils' social research provided the apartheid regime with the necessary support. The HSRC had a particularly strong relationship with the government, cooperating with it and the universities in devising research agendas (Fleisch, 1995; Chisholm, 2002; Chisholm & Morrow, 2007). One of the HSRC's key functions was to distribute

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research funding. Some institutions resented this role and associated the HSRC with their difficulties in securing government research funds. This resentment persisted, and White (1992), for example, questioned the role of the HSRC in a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic South Africa and doubted whether it could adapt to a changed research environment.

In his critical analysis of Dr Gideon Malherbe's speech at the inaugural meeting of the National Research Council in 1939, Fleisch (1995) illuminates the conceptual and historical foundations of the relationship between the HSRC and government. Malherbe was President of the South African Association of Sciences, Director of the National Bureau of Educational and Social Research (NBESR) – the predecessor of the HSRC – and author of the definitive history of South African education and of numerous other publications.

When the HSRC was officially established in 1969, the government expected its researchers to produce research that would support its policies and influence social and economic change in the country. Chisholm (2002) concludes that, to all intents and purposes, social science research took place within the policymaking arena and that policy experts served state intentions. She argues that this happened because state power requires that policy be legitimated by research.

Policy context

South Africa's democratic government has reformed the research agenda to reflect changing national and international research perspectives. Under apartheid, research information from the science councils tended to support the apartheid policy. Noticing the shifts, Chisholm (2002) and Jansen (2003) argue that post-apartheid research has changed fundamentally. Not only has the research process changed by involving more institutions and people than previously was the case, but the areas being researched and the methodologies used have also changed. Research councils such as the HSRC have adapted to the changes and now play a pivotal role in supporting policymakers with relevant research (Kruss, 2005; Letseka, 2005). The Department of Science and Technology (DST) has also increased national investment in research and development (R&D) to reflect the new orientations (DST, 2002).

The White Paper on Science and Technology (1996) explicitly recognises human sciences in technology. To meet the national research objectives, the HSRC had to transform and reorient its own objectives. Instead of blindly supporting the government agenda, the new institution committed itself to the production and dissemination of cutting-edge research that supports national and international development and has a measurable impact. The vision and mission of the HSRC portrays the organisation as seeking to serve as a bridge between research, policy and action. In addition, relationships with other research organisations and universities are now of paramount importance. The organisation seeks maximum collaboration with them in terms of competing for research opportunities, deployment of the country's researchers, development of memorandum of understanding (MoU's),

training of young research scientists as well as producing research that impacts on policy.

The article began by introducing the historical and political background of the study, and the contemporary political context. This is followed by an exploration of the institutional changes that took place at the HSRC from the mid-1990s to the time of the inquiry and discussion of the context of inquiry. Then there is a discussion of the process of research planning, the project start-up, the methodology and the findings of the inquiry. All this is important, because the research process provides data for exploring how researchers and government officials negotiate their positions and research identities. The findings are followed by a discussion of what happened as the study proceeded and how the report was generated. Lastly, we draw some conclusions.

Reforming and redefining the post-apartheid HSRC

This article focuses on research in education, a major theme in the work of the HSRC and, indeed, in South African social research generally. South African education research has been subjected to two major forces, namely the global trend towards the marketisation of education and the redefinition of the role of public education. We discussed earlier how the HSRC found a new identity in the altered political context. This redefinition happened within the constraining environment of economic policy and fiscal austerity measures. Consequently, by the mid-1990s, the HSRC budget allocations had declined from those of the 1980s (HSRC, 2003; Chisholm & Morrow, 2007). Instead of disbursing funds to universities (Chisholm & Morrow, 2007: 55), the HSRC was forced to compete with them for research funding. The organisation experienced an extremely harsh phase and seems to have barely escaped threats of closure (White, 1992). To avoid this fate and become relevant and viable, the HSRC had to adapt to the new political and financial context, develop new research priorities, and establish a new research ethos under professional academic control (Cloete & Muller, 1991).

The HSRC retrenched some of the apartheid-era researchers and employed new personnel, most of whom were critics of the old HSRC (Chisholm & Morrow, 2007). The changes influenced every aspect of the HSRC. Management changed, with each new CEO introducing alterations intended to build a better institution. The current CEO was appointed soon after the HSRC review of 2003. The organisational focus involved improving the quality of research, improving the research management system, encouraging partnership research, increasing stakeholder involvement, and improving staff diversity.

The education programme, for which the authors work, is one of the most significant in the organisation, and educational research remains an important dimension of the HSRC's activities, even following the period of transformation. The 2003 institutional review described the relationship between government and the new HSRC as close, professional and cordial. Undeniably, the organisation has

made great strides in instituting change. According to Chisholm and Morrow (2007), the challenge for researchers is how to interpret, manage and balance serving the state and market interests, while maintaining independence and the ability to conduct creative research. The changes are positive and create space for conducting independent research. However, according to Chisholm and Morrow (2007), researchers need to claim it. Researchers are indeed doing so diligently.

Many researchers have displayed impeccable integrity. For example, the research on HIV/AIDS by Shisana and Simbayi (2002) openly challenged government policy. Despite the report being harshly criticised, the researchers maintained their integrity and independence. Sadly, government does not always encourage and appreciate researchers who speak the truth and, despite changes, the past continues to shape the new HSRC research agenda and influence how researchers perform their work. This unfortunate tendency has been strengthened by the lack of debates on, or research into how researchers claim or assert their research independence.

This is the background to this inquiry. The authors of this article have participated in both government- and market-funded studies, and have drawn on personal experience. We also used secondary sources. This article specifically focuses on a study commissioned by a provincial government department, which we refer to as the 'government department'. We explore the tensions that arose between the client (the officials of the commissioning government department) and the researchers who found themselves resisting client pressure on the formulation of the findings. We use this example to discuss how noble intentions of breaking from the past and conducting quality, independent and value free research can sometimes collide with the desire for research that can support officials in their political and bureaucratic practices. This conflict is not unique to the HSRC. It constantly confronts researchers both locally and internationally. However, this fraught process is frequently ignored and attention focused solely on the final research product.

This tension is not surprising, because research and policymaking have moved closer together (Nisbet, 1981). Globally, there is an increased demand for accessible, policy-relevant educational research (Crossley & Holmes, 2001). We view the discussion of these issues as critical for researchers, users of research and other relevant stakeholders. This inquiry drew from the experiences of three HSRC researchers, two of whom are the authors of this article and the third was interviewed to establish whether his experience corroborated that of the authors. We reflected on how we worked with the same client, the government, on various projects. We focused on the negotiations that go on during the process, how the government tries to influence research findings, and the lessons we learned from these experiences. We concluded that it is imperative for researchers and their clients to understand how relationships can make or break a study/project. In this particular instance, relationships were strained, with potentially major problems if these relationships were not properly managed.

Context of the inquiry

In October 2008, a provincial department of education tendered for provision of expertise in the development of a research agenda and research management framework. On winning the tender, the HSRC team had four months to conduct the study and present the report to the client. The brief upon which both parties agreed was to help the department develop a research agenda to inform its research priorities and a research framework to manage research and research-related information in the department. Prior to this study, commissioning research was the responsibility of various directorates within the department. Research funds were controlled within directorates.

Immediately after being awarded the tender, we began consultations with the client. A research steering committee consisting of two researchers from the HSRC and four government officials was established. In conjunction with the government team, the research proposal was revised to reflect the research brief, and consensus was reached on the research terms. It was decided that we should formally meet three times during the period of the study (prior to implementation; to present the draft report, and to present the final report). Other meetings were informal and held during the interviews that formed part of the research methodology.

Methodology

The study used an interpretive and qualitative framework design. According to Mertens (1998), the basic assumption of the interpretive paradigm is that knowledge is socially constructed by people who are active in the research process. Thus researchers, as Mertens cites Schwandt (1994), should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it. In addition, Smit (2003) argues that qualitative research for education policy offers substance and deeper nuanced understandings of the complexities at policy-implementation level. To obtain the required information, semi-structured interview questions, developed after the research team had met to discuss their content, were used for data collection. These questions focused on the key areas identified as requiring resolution and discussion in order to generate answers and recommendations for improvement; the main requirements for a research agenda and framework. Approximately 35 senior departmental officials, ranging from directors to Deputy Director General, were interviewed in their offices, with each interview lasting from 40 minutes to one hour. During the interviews, notes were taken and later analysed thematically. The advantage of using thematic analysis is that data collection and analysis can occur simultaneously.

Focus group interviews were also conducted with 15 directors from various districts within the province. The questions focused on their understanding of the department's research agenda. Field notes were taken during the focus group sessions. The interviews were conducted on the assumption that existing national, provincial and departmental priorities were not likely to change and that the

responses would assist in defining the specific research agenda of the directorates on the basis of their existing work, priorities and requirements. The interview questions were, accordingly, designed to elicit responses from the interviewees on the research agenda as well as on how research should be managed and organised. The questions provided the situational analysis on the basis of which the report was prepared.

To supplement the interview data, a review of departmental documents was conducted, primarily to identify the presence of any documented information about their research agenda and to learn more about the research agenda and the policies relevant to the commissioned research.

Key findings

The completed report was divided into two sections, each responding to the two questions we had set out to answer, namely how to set a research agenda and how to create a research management strategy. For each question, we specified who was to be responsible for the activities involved and how each activity would impact on the department. From the interviews we learned that there was no problem with regard to the research priorities set by the department and the provincial government, or with broader national and international agendas such as the Millennium Development Goals, nor was there a need for more firmly expressed research priorities. Rather, the need was for a formal process of coordination of existing priorities.

The interviewees agreed that research within the department needed to be centrally controlled. They also decided that a research committee should be established and that the research unit should act as a secretariat to the committee and facilitate the research process. This should result in an annual research plan indicating who would be commissioning what kind of research. The HSRC researchers recommended that, in order to facilitate the introduction of the new processes, staff in the research unit should receive further training, their numbers should be increased, and they should be repositioned to support the new functions assigned to them. In addition, the research committee should manage, assure quality, and account for all the research commissioned by the department.

The research participants favoured a research management system wherein the research unit would initiate the research process by calling for proposals from the various directorates for consideration by the research committee. As the secretariat of the research committee, the research unit would assess the abstracts and forward those that might deserve further consideration to the research committee for review. Once the abstracts had been assessed by the committee, deserving proposals would be returned to the directorates via the research unit for development into fully fledged proposals. It was proposed that the research unit should review proposals before passing them on for final scrutiny by the research committee at its second meeting.

Based on the report findings, it was proposed that research committee meetings be held quarterly, unless there was an *ad hoc* research proposal to be considered.

After approval of research proposals, meetings should be held to review progress reports, ensure that projects are on track, and consider *ad hoc* requests. Existing channels of dissemination, which consisted of distributing material in hard copy, were to continue in an improved form. The research unit was asked to produce quarterly reports and a quarterly research bulletin that would include abstracts and research findings for wider dissemination.

To support the system, an electronic research management system was to be created. This was to interface with the department's web portal and with other information sources on the Internet. In addition, the report recommended that possibilities for access to research within higher education institutions should be explored, in order to maximise the impact of the department's research.

Analysis of the processes leading to research report generation

Communication

There was extensive consultation between the researchers and the client. Communication was initially cordial, as attested by one of the authors of this article who was the HSRC contact person with the government department. Throughout the planning and preparatory stages, the government official responsible for managing research was the main official with whom we communicated, electronically or telephonically. During the research phase, the Acting Chief Director for Information and Knowledge Management, who was also the research manager's immediate supervisor, emerged as the major driver of communications and the project on the government department's side. We were challenged by poor preparation for meetings or a concealed form of contestation of certain sections of our reports. This manifested itself in the Acting Chief Director insisting that in meetings we read out every document line by line, although the documents had been sent to them for reading prior to the meetings. This slowed progress, resulting in more meetings than initially planned and budgeted for. Consequently, as researchers, we spent more time on the project than envisaged. This was a major source of strain.

Project meetings

We engaged and negotiated with the client throughout. In the first meeting, the discussion involved decisions about sampling, and it was proposed that interviews be conducted with a sample of Deputy Director Generals (DDGs), Chief Directors and Directors at head office and at the district offices. A random sample was drawn from these three categories in such a manner as to cover all the main areas of interest.

At the second meeting, we presented the draft report to the client as planned and discussed its contents. No problem was experienced with the proposed management of non-commissioned research, but there was a problem with the strategy we proposed for the management of commissioned research. The source of

disagreement was the management of research funds, but this did not impede the progress.

At the third meeting, which should have been our last, the atmosphere was tense and hostile. The government team were still not happy with the research management framework presented to them. The Acting Chief Director for Information and Knowledge Management spoke throughout the meeting, while other officials were guarded to the point of near-total silence in the meetings. They wanted the HSRC team to provide a non-pdf version of the report so that they could prepare a report to present to their management meeting. In their terms, this would make the report 'their own'. We could not agree to this arrangement and reminded them about HSRC policies and research ethics. We insisted that it would be unethical for the department to change the report for its own purpose. If they insisted, we suggested, they should proceed and we would retain our final pdf report version.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings show that, with regard to research priorities set by the departmental research unit and the provincial department of education, there was neither a problem with nor a need for more firmly expressed priorities. We believe that the client had every intention of responding to the government call for sound research leading to research-based policy development, acknowledging that, at present, research-based policymaking possesses more value and conviction for various stakeholders. In addition, they wanted to make the research unit vibrant, innovative and respected. The government departmental unit, as it was then, was not sustaining or commissioning research that impacted on decision-making in the department, as conditions were not conducive for that to occur. Several factors including unfilled vacancies, underfunding, and the inadequate research skills of some officials aggravated the situation. Furthermore, the Acting Chief Director was anxious to make changes, as she knew that her position was subject to confirmation. Her position was, in fact, confirmed during the course of the study. She asserted that the report delivered information justifying the changes she intended to implement in the research unit and the research process. She understood the power of using research to bring about the desired change in how research is conducted and used in policy and decision-making and was anxious about senior management buy-in. In this instance, Weiss's (1979) observation that research can be used as ammunition for the side that finds its conclusions congenial and supportive, with partisans flourishing the evidence in an attempt to neutralise opponents, convince waverers, and bolster supporters is pertinent. Even if conclusions have to be ripped out of context with the suppression of qualifications and evidence, research becomes grist to the mill.

It is indisputable that the study intentions were good, but the underlying motivation was problematic, creating a tension between what the officials desired as the ideal and the reality. The study was fated to be a mere tool of the unit and the chief directorate, as it appeared that the officials were intent on legitimising a

predetermined course of action. Discouraging this unethical use of research, Jansen (2003) argues that it needs to maintain critical distance and space which enables the researcher to speak the truth. He argues, and we concur, that the complexity of educational change begins to reveal itself where policy, politics, and research meet and informed dialogue, which requires capable leadership that recognises the power of information in decision-making, becomes a necessity, moderating and mediating political pressures for quick action to satisfy particular demands. To be influential in shaping policies, Jansen proposes that research units need highly skilled staff members who are eloquent advocates for the power of information in education policy, planning, and provisioning. Again, we agree that highly skilled personnel who can assist clients to reconsider questionable research intentions and perceive the benefits of research even when it does not speak to their immediate interests are crucial.

In addition, it is clear that researchers are constantly challenged to reflect on the political, ideological and ethical issues involved in the research process. This reflective engagement is crucial, as it enables insights into who exactly the clients are, why they commissioned the research, what the commissioned research means to them, and what they expect from the researcher. Soobrayan (2003: 107) observes that, when dealing with the ethics and politics of research, one takes risks, makes choices and takes responsibility. This shows that research is never neutral or free from context: researchers and clients impose their fears and anxieties on research. As researchers, faced with protecting the new and perhaps fragile cordiality between the new government and the HSRC, we were faced with the option of yielding to the pressure of government officials. However, as members of the wider research community bound by research ethics, we chose to defend our research and stand by the HSRC research ethics. This dynamic, as Waardenburg (2001) notes, shows that one cannot take for granted that making research results more widely known or clearer to the potential users will automatically mean they will be utilised to a greater extent. As Weiss (1979) observes, an understanding of diverse perspectives on the uses of research may help overcome the disenchantment with the usefulness of social science research that has afflicted those who search for utility only in problem-solving contexts. A less utilitarian approach and a more subtle sociocultural and methodological understanding may arm the researcher in confronting problems of this kind.

Clearly, the challenge in conducting research for government may not only be issues of coordination but also relate to the setting of research priorities. We believe that, in this instance, the study was never separated from the political environment in which it was conducted. Goals shifted according to the changing landscape of the commissioning authority, causing tension between researchers and project management. Such conflicts have been cited by other researchers, and they can often be beneficial, revealing critical issues not initially understood or addressed. However, they can also retard progress, especially if they result from one party not having done what was required of them, for example, reading the report prior to the

meeting to discuss it. This can strain the researcher's budget and thus the relationship. Trostle, Bronfman and Langer (1999) describe the complex relationships and multiple factors that influence research and policy formation. They argue that some decision-makers do not consider knowledge of research necessary for policy and programme development, while some researchers are of the opinion that decision-makers will not recognise their work or will not be able to put recommendations derived from research into practice. This leads to a kind of "mutual intellectual disdain" when both researchers and decision-makers want to be recognised as the greatest contributors to the solution of the problem. It is evident that policymakers and researchers are likely to view research findings in different ways, and the same could be said about how they analyse them and formulate policy decisions. Weiss (1979) contends that the use of social science research in public policy is extraordinarily complex, hence the many meanings of research utilisation. Gibbons, Zammit, Youngentob, Possingham, Lindenmayer, Bekessy, Burgman, Colyvan, Considine, Felton, Hobbs, Hurley, McAlpine, McCarthy, Moore, Robinson, Salt and Wintle (2008) remind us that researchers and policymakers operate under different demands, constraints, and reward systems. It is said that, in modern governments, power flows from the top downwards and the careers of many policymakers are, therefore, dependent on advancing policies and programmes that reflect the philosophy of government and its constituency. Similarly, Brownson, Royer, Ewing and McBride (2006) note that policymakers face complex challenges of analysis and implementation. Nevertheless, if government departments want to promote research values and integrity, it is imperative that they consider their biases and be aware of the relevance and utility of research-based information to planning and policy decisions.

We conclude that the political climate plays a critical role in influencing how research for government should be conducted and the results be produced, placing intense pressure on researchers as they continuously question their values to ensure that they comply with research ethics and their institutional research policies. The pressure is likely to seriously constrain the dialogue between government as client and the researchers. Jansen (2003) notes the complexity of conducting such research, which may become a reactionary force sustaining the status quo rather than having a reforming influence. Thus, it is essential that closer linkages between researchers and government policymakers be developed, as this may also facilitate researchers' understanding of the broader social and political systems and the legitimacy and interdependence of various interests involved. As Nisbet (1981: 104) contends, "the prime task for researchers is to make sure that the work of research, its nature and function, its potential and its inevitable limitation, is better understood by those who have the responsibility of decision and action". It is also significant, as Weiss (1979) aptly mentions, that social scientists should pay attention to the imperatives of policymaking systems and consider soberly what they can do, not necessarily to increase the use of research in absolute terms, but to improve the contribution that it makes to the wisdom of social policy. Lastly, we concur with Waardenburg (2001) that there is no one simple answer as to what exactly constitutes the utilisation of research results. It is

not a logical linear process leading from fundamental research, through fundamental-strategic and applied research to the dissemination of results.

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