

CENTRE FOR APPLIED SOCIAL RESEARCH (proposal)

Author's note:

This document was originally prepared for the Research Committee of the then Polytechnic of North London (PNL) later incorporated into the University of North London and subsequently into London Metropolitan University, as a potential bid to the National Advisory Body for research money for 1984/85 and afterwards.

In the event it was not used as PNL's bid was restricted to the Science and Technology area. It is closely based on my 1976 proposal which eventually led to the establishment of the Survey Research Unit in 1978, and which was subsequently modified for PNL's 1979 bid to SSRC for a Designated Research Centre. When the latter bid failed to make the final shortlist, I released it to Roger Jowell in the hope that it would help the bid by Social and Community Planning Research

Although there have been many developments since then (British Social Attitudes series, Joint Centre for Survey Methods at SCPR and ESRC Interdisciplinary Research Centre at Essex, ESRC Research Methods Centre etc.) the arguments and proposals are still valid.

This document was submitted as evidence of my ability to present arguments for realistic developments based on existing resources and to co-ordinate people from widely differing academic backgrounds, some of whom had little or no previous experience of applied or empirical research. Such an approach could be still adapted for strategic purposes in future plans although recent developments by ESRC have gone a long way to meet the perceived need for more rigorous and accountable research methods training and resources in the UK

John Hall 20 Jan 2009

THE POLYTECHNIC OF NORTH LONDON

Faculty of Social Studies

Department of Applied Social Studies

jointly with **Department of Sociology**

and **School of Librarianship and Information Studies**

Outline proposal for a "**CENTRE FOR APPLIED SOCIAL RESEARCH**" to be developed around the **SURVEY RESEARCH UNIT**. (Based on an application to SSRC for Designated Research Centre status).

INTRODUCTION

Social research in Britain today is characterised by a new awareness of the need to integrate social theory with empirical research, particularly sociological theory (broadly defined) with survey research. There is also increasing concern to improve training in empirical research methods at both under - and postgraduate level (cf Psychology Committee report, SSRC Newsletter No.39, April 1979). The recent growth of social research organizations separated from academic institutions is disadvantageous to teaching and training in the one, and to research in the other.

There is a clear case for the establishment in Britain of at least one multi-disciplinary, multi-method, multi-problem research centre along the lines of the major institutes of American universities (eg The Institute for Social Research at Ann Arbor, Michigan; the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia; the National Opinion Research Centre at Chicago) all of which trace their origins to survey research. The SSRC Statistics Committee sees a priority for "some form of replacement for the functions of the SSRC Survey Unit" ie a centre pursuing a programme of continuing and original research in survey methodology and associated techniques, able to act as a resource and advisory centre and active in teaching and training at all levels.

Such a centre would need to act as a clearing house for information as well as contain within it highly specialised research scientists accustomed to working in a multi-disciplinary team. However, specialist staff could not be recruited or retained without some on-going programme(s) of research in which they had a substantive personal interest. Accordingly we suggest that our own Survey Research Unit, with its substantive research, methodological focus and advisory and teaching functions should be seriously considered as the basis for a research centre.

SURVEY RESEARCH UNIT

The Survey Research Unit was formally established as a research unit of the Department of Applied Social Studies on May 1st 1978. Its terms of reference are:

to seek funds for social survey research and related work to be based in the Polytechnic and to respond to requests for assistance in preparing grant applications by staff seeking funds for similar work in other departments.

To seek to respond positively to requests for appropriate research or research assistance by local authorities and other bodies, particularly in the London area.

to make available advice and assistance to staff and students of the Polytechnic on survey research and on statistical and computing applications in the social sciences.

At the request of John Hall, the Unit Director, the Faculty set up an Advisory Panel "to advise and assist the Director in planning the work of the Unit". (Minutes of Social Studies Faculty Board: 21st April 1978). The Panel is chaired by Dr Paul Corrigan (H/D Applied Social Studies) and its members include Kevin McGarry (H/D School of Librarianship & Information Studies) Noel Parry (H/D Sociology and Chairman of Faculty), Dr Peter Glasner (Course Tutor, BSc Sociology), Patricia Leighton (Law Department), Cliff Harris (PNL Finance Officer). In addition to the Director there are three full time and two part time research staff. It is proposed to enhance the Survey Research Unit as a Research Centre largely, but not exclusively funded from external sources.

The Centre would have three main functions:

to continue and develop work in the field of subjective social indicators.

to develop methodology.

to act as a resource and information facility for fellow researchers.

SUBJECTIVE SOCIAL INDICATORS

A multi-disciplinary, multi-method, multi-faceted programme of survey-based social indicators research, of interest to a wide range of social scientists and policy-makers, concerned to integrate theory and methods through a continuing programme of national and local surveys centred on social change and quality of life, but with a strong advisory and teaching role, preferably in collaboration with one or more agencies in North London. This would be a continuation and development of the separate, but related, surveys of "Quality of Life" and "Changing Political Values" conducted at the SSRC Survey Unit by Mark Abrams, John Hall and Alan Marsh. We would concentrate on subjective indicators, but relate these to objective indicators derived from surveys and other sources (eg the Census). We are particularly interested in moral and political values and in social-psychological correlates of economic and social change.

We aim to develop theoretical frameworks for social indicators and to construct and test mathematical models for them. This would require a minimum of one annual interview survey of a relatively large sample of the adult population, which could also be used to develop and standardise survey measures for bench-mark and monitoring purposes. Cross-national indicators will be developed from SRU's continuing participation in two international groups:

Workshop on **Values and Social Problem Indicators in Contemporary Europe**, chaired by Prof Walter Rüegg (Universität Bern) and sponsored by the European Science Foundation and the Volkswagen Foundation

European Value Systems Study Group, chaired by Prof Jan Kerkhofs (Catholic University of Louvain) and sponsored by a private charity.

Values are under-researched in the UK, but are theoretically important to any full account of social indicators and quality of life (QoL).

Staff of SRU were closely involved in previous SSRC QoL work and in cross-national work on QoL and on political values. This early work serves as a model for much current British and overseas research, but methodological work is still needed. Another concern will be with social policy implications, both public perceptions of policy, equity etc. and public opinion of issues and problems and their solutions. Again this would link up with previous work of the SSRC/SU, but also with the broader work of the Department through research on client groups of the Welfare State, policy evaluation and collaborative research with local public bodies and community groups.

METHODOLOGY (especially surveys, statistics, computing and social theory)

Whilst the main focus would be on survey research methods, there is ample expertise available in the Faculty for "qualitative" methods and also for formal theoretical work extending into logic and philosophy. There are also a number of other research programmes under way, some of which overlap in content and method with the QoL research.

There is a clear demand for methodology from a number of SSRC Committees, (Newsletter 39). There is also a need to integrate theory and method, particularly between survey research and sociology and related areas (eg social policy and social administration). The SSRC/SU seminars chaired by Janowitz produced a book (Leggatt, 1975) but need following up.

We estimate that 10 million interviews are carried out in Britain each year and that total expenditure on survey research of all kinds must run to more than £100 million annually. A significant proportion of this goes on social research. The most recent estimate for funded social research (Perry, 1975) is 75% by value, 60% by volume, based on survey methods, but this does not take account of surveys done in-house by local authorities or other organizations which are not always costed separately. The technical standards of many academic and local authority surveys leave a great deal to be desired, both on the design side and with regard to analysis and reporting. Thus much survey research represents poor value for money because of low levels of technical competence and/or lack of theoretical rigour. Effective use of social research data requires well-documented and easy-to-use standard computer software available on a wide range of machines. Packages such as SPSS have revolutionised social science, but there are still a number of gaps to be filled (eg data-base management and interactive software) SRU is working to fill some of these and also on gaps in statistical techniques.

RESEARCH RESOURCE AND INFORMATION CENTRE

There is an almost insatiable demand for advice and assistance with research from academics, public bodies and local community groups, especially with surveys, statistical analysis and computer processing. This was a prime function of the SSRC/SU and has been maintained by SRU staff, some of whom were with the old Unit. There is a clear need for a known centre where advice and assistance can be obtained at all stages of survey research, and ranging in level from the trivial to the highly specialised, including doing part or all of the survey if necessary.

The SRU is already recognised as providing a valuable service to those about to embark on surveys, or who have started them and run into trouble. Provision of this service is precariously dependent on our ability to attract short-term contracts for surveys and statistical analysis. All too often, however, the clients have no resources other than their own time, and this places a very heavy burden on SRU staff who dislike refusing help. It is our experience that many investigators get money too easily for surveys, and in particular that supervisors too easily allow graduate students to undertake surveys who then have to be rescued and virtually supervised by SRU staff.

We therefore propose to put the SRU on a firmer footing by providing guaranteed funding for the core support staff on whom the bulk of the advisory and assistance work falls. We should especially like to set up a clearing house on survey methodology and social indicators research staffed by a qualified librarian, stocked with specialist material, reprints and pre-publication drafts (of which SRU has a very large, but uncatalogued collection) and capable of providing an information and cuttings service in its chosen field(s). SRU would also expect to publish a range of technical and methodological manuals as a resource for the research community at large, to set high standards of documentation (abysmally low in most British surveys) and to carry other researchers' questions on our annual survey(s). We should also aim to produce teaching materials, possibly in kit form, and to hold a series of workshops on various aspects of our work, including a series on Research Management, the poor quality of which accounts for many unfinished or badly delayed research projects. Secondary analysis is an under-utilized technique in Britain, partly for academic reasons, but mostly for lack of adequately documented data and restricted access. Wider availability at an early date of key data sets would enable more cost-effective use of SSRC funded surveys. SRU will make available from its national and local surveys fully documented data-sets including ready-to-use SPSS system-files for use in teaching and research two to three months after completion of fieldwork. SRU will continue its policy of acquiring SSRC Survey Archive data and returning the surveys as SPSS files where these are not already available.

TRAINING

PNL is one of the few places offering practical training in survey research, statistics and computing at both undergraduate and graduate level. PNL offers the first undergraduate degree with professional training in Social Research, and also offers this on the evening degree in Sociology. The planning and teaching of both courses is heavily dependent on teaching input by research staff, especially SRU and CESSA. Whilst the ESRC is not principally concerned with undergraduate research training, the poor quality of most undergraduate courses with regard to quantitative methods means that ESRC funds are absorbed in compensating for gaps in undergraduate training, at least in sociology and related areas. The old BA (Hons) in Applied Social Studies had a feature unique to Britain in its annual North London Area Survey, modelled on the Detroit Area Survey, which is used to generate social science data of value to the local community as well as an educational exercise in planning and conducting an interview survey. The programme was successful in motivating students to learn about research, and, even more important, to try to understand statistical methods.

We also have two postgraduate level evening courses: Survey Analysis Workshop and Survey Research Practice aimed at graduate students, research staffs and others involved in surveys. It is taught by staff of SRU, and by practising professionals from outside PNL (principally from Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR) OPCS Social Survey Division and National Opinion Polls).

The courses attract 35-40 students each year and may be submitted as components for a PNL Diploma in Survey Research and a Master's in Survey Research (CNAAB). The courses can be taken separately by students registered for degrees in other London colleges. Specialised intensive courses and seminars can be arranged to meet the needs of particular clients. The SRU had Pool Status from the SSRC Computing Committee for training to PhD with survey research, statistics and computing. The first student started January 1979 with a first degree in Philosophy and a Master's in Social Philosophy. His PhD title was "Towards a Definitional Framework for Social Indicators Research", but meanwhile he worked for his M.Phil by investigating the relationship of census data to survey measures on the SSRC QOL material, as well as sitting in on the design of proposed European values studies. All students, including undergraduates, are encouraged to involve themselves in live projects of SRU, and the linked studentship is the preferred form of training for postgraduates. The Department of Sociology runs a taught MA in Sociology and Social Policy and units of this course will be available to SRU students.

The SRU would be prepared to act as host for apprentices or graduates students from other colleges who need intensive on-the-job training in survey methods. We should like to see a proper graduate apprenticeship scheme operating in conjunction with reputable organizations such as SCPR and NOP and possibly OPCS Social Survey Division.

LOCATION

We feel that it is entirely appropriate that NAB provide funds for research in polytechnics and that PNL is particularly well-placed to be a major national centre for applied social research, partly on account of the vocational nature of most polytechnic courses, partly because of our close links with the local community, and partly because of our location in the Inner City with its problems. There are very good communications to Central London and a direct line to Heathrow.

PNL has developed rapidly in recent years in the area of social research and research training. This is particularly demonstrated in the Department of Applied Social Studies which has attracted more than £750,000 in external funds since 1975 from a range of funding agencies (MRC, SSRC, Nuffield, Gulbenkian, DHSS, Sports Council, Rowntree, King's Fund and a range of charitable or public bodies). Adding the value of ILEA research posts takes the figure to £1,000,000 of which the SRU accounts for about £600,000 since October 1976. PNL has acquired the files of the Community Development Unit, closed by the Home Office, as well as what was left of the SSRC Survey Unit.

A large number of local projects on Inner City Problems are funded by the Polytechnic with cash grants from the Local Affairs Committee or College Research Assistants/Fellows from the Research Committee. The Survey Research Unit, which has played a prominent part in these developments, is modelled on the SSRC/SU, but differs in that it is firmly based in a teaching department and contributes regularly to training in survey and other methods of empirical social research, especially on the quantitative side. The advisory functions of the SSRC/SU have been continued and some of the staff involved full or part time in research and teaching.

Dr Mark Abrams was External Examiner for the Social Research and Planning Option of the old degree and continues as External Assessor for the Diploma of the Market Research Society. Key documents and data tapes have been safeguarded for the ESRC against the day when a new Survey Unit could be established. The BSA Survey Research Group was organized from the Unit, the BSA Quantitative Sociology Newsletter was edited and published from the Unit, and the Unit jointly organized and edited the newsletter of the new UK SPSS Users' Group (UKSUG) with PNL Computer Services. The independent Study Group on Computers in Survey Analysis was for several years organized from PNL jointly with the SSRC SU. SRU was frequently used as a referee by SSRC for projects involving surveys or computing, and wrote the guidelines on seeking research funds for BSA "Network".

SRU has continuing personal contact with survey research organizations in Britain and overseas, and has the standing good wishes of directors of these for the establishment of the kind of institute described in this paper. It is to SRU that they look for a new British initiative in survey research and quality of life indicators.

One series of projects on the elderly, particularly £125,400 from DHSS has led to the establishment of a sister unit the Centre for Environmental and Social Studies in Ageing (CESSA) which is making its own bid separately.

Research Centre status is warranted by our integrated approach to theory, method and problems, by the resource orientation and by the level and quality of our previous work.

LEVEL OF OPERATION

A viable centre will need a number of experienced specialists both as core support staff and as substantive research scientists. The advisory and support functions presuppose a multi-disciplinary team approach such as that developed at SRU. The SRU barely manages to maintain its specialist staff by taking short-term appointments for small contracts, but this is highly unsatisfactory since it offers no career prospects and means that no superannuation is available. SRU has already lost good researchers through lack of funds. It currently has few funds for technical support, and is consequently allowed to keep some of the income from the evening courses. The Unit is thus continually threatened by lack of guaranteed funding.

As with the SSRC/SU there will be a predominance of senior staff, but this is both necessary and justified by the advisory function as well as by the research design role. Fieldwork will always be subcontracted by tender. SRU would take two to three years to become fully operational, but would aim to become self-financing after the first eight years, at least for substantive research programmes. Permanent funding for the support function may be more difficult to find, but it is debateable whether this should come from SSRC or from other agencies such as UGC, CLEA, DES or ILEA. An application to support community groups in London is currently with the GLC.

The SSRC/SU operated a visiting fellowship scheme, and this is something we should wish to continue, both for eminent overseas scholars and for British scholars on sabbatical or secondment. Conditions of service for research staff are the subject of current negotiations at PNL, but are closely modelled on those at Polytechnic of the South Bank. To date SRU has operated according to the principles of good practice agreed between SSRC and the AUT for SSRC Units, but staffing would be in accordance with the new conditions at PNL.

A full scale centre with external agencies bearing the full operating cost would run to £100-150,000 per annum but this would be offset by income from seminars, courses, publications, consultancies, and by salary costs met from other sources. A basic operation could however be launched for £30-50,000 plus the costs of fieldwork (say £25K pa) depending on how many staff of SRU remain on the PNL payroll. The Centre would build up from £50K to £150K over three years. It should be noted that a significant proportion of this cost would be going out to other researchers in the form of advisory, support, consultancy and sub-contract work.