

CONFIDENTIAL: Note on SRU from Director of Research and Consultancy

Origins: established 1978 as unit within ASS, accountable to Faculty Board.

Terms of Reference: assistance to staff and students ⁴⁵²
respond to outside bodies
seek funds for survey/related work

Staffing: One permanent and continuous member of staff, JFH. Fluctuations in additional staff dependent on level of external funding and/or PNL support. In March, 1980 this amounted to 10 (JR, SH, DP, DW, SOB, LK, FB, CG, JC, GH), the majority on full-time contracts. In Jan, 1988 there are 4 part-time staff, due to end March 1988. In mid 1986 there were no staff in the unit.

PNL Support: 10yr PL post

3yr RF SH Values Project
3yr RF SMP/LAK Ageing Research
1yr RF DP DIY Research Manual
3yr RF DMW/CG/FC Research Careers
3yr RF JR Computing Teaching Pack
3yr RA LC Community Research Support Needs
1yr RA ES Correlates of Childcare Needs

10yr Departmental sec/admin support (ASS)

External Research: 1981/82 £76,009
1982/83 £58,289
1983/84 £ 4,086
1984/85 £ 9,730
1985/86 £18,516
1986/87 £29,514* NB known debt of £7,888

Areas of Contribution:

* **advice and assistance to PNL:** (i) valuable re undergraduate projects; (ii) ad hoc contributions to staff research; (iii) 1985/6 ;1986/7 survey of PNL students for ACB

* **teaching:** (i) research methods/computing teaching in ASS from JFH; (ii) research methods/statistics teaching from practising researchers in SRU; (iii) part-time evening course in survey analysis/ survey research

* **response to outside bodies:** summary of research projects, 1978 to 1985 demonstrates both the number and range of organisations where SRU has been involved over the period.

* **revenue earning capacity:** the SRU has attracted considerable funds for research-related activity over the past decade, particularly in the early years.

* **spin-off units:** two distinct areas of interest/expertise were developed within SRU: ageing research and community research. This resulted in the formation of CESSA, the Centre for Environmental and Social Studies in Ageing; and CRAC, the Community Research Advisory Centre. The former is completely

Recent and Relevant Changes at PNL

* **computing support:** (i) an improved support service from PNLCS with reorganisation; a new head of service; and a new mainframe computer has reduced the demand for specialist advice from SRU; (ii) the increased access to and use of micros means that an increasing proportion of staff are becoming computer literate; (iii) the presence of SOLIS in LH since 1984 has increased the numbers of staff with specialist skills; (iv) a change in curriculum for 2nd yr BASS students has reduced substantially the number of research projects undertaken (by 30 per year); (v) over the 10 yr period research methodology has made important progress in the area of qualitative work and staff in other units are better equipped to advise and assist.

* **teaching changes:** the loss of academic staff who previously taught research methods (CF, BH, SL, KC) has increased the teaching load of JFH and reduced the time available to contribute advice and assistance, or to develop research proposals and to secure external funding.

* **PNL resources:** the contraction of block grant funding and the increased pressure on ILEA affirmative action "top-up" has led to alternative criteria and procedures for creating and allocating RA/RF posts within PNL. SRU is unlikely to attract further support at a time when the faculty is directing resources to those projects which underpin the new degree and is responding to new demands from outside agencies (viz Child Abuse research).

* **general research support:** (i) the creation of the new post, Director of Research and Consultancy, and the promotion of Research Development Office activities makes widely available and accessible guidance and support for writing research proposals; costing proposals; research design; research opportunities; locating sources of funding; (ii) the designation of Faculty Research Co-ordinators means that much of this help could be obtained at faculty level.

* **research financing at PNL:** it is PNL policy to encourage that research which can demonstrate a capacity to move towards self-financing status. Research units which have received internal support in the past will be expected to make the major contributions, as in the case of MARU (external contracts increased from £204.5K in 1985/86 to £248.7K in 1986/87). Overall, the efforts by RDO, FRC's and colleagues across the polytechnic have achieved an increase in research income from £517.1K to £549.7K in the past year.

It is within this broad context that the activities of SRU and the relevance of the terms of reference to current issues and the present role of research can usefully be reviewed.

General Difficulties associated with SRU

* **finance issues:** the Finance Office has experienced a number of difficulties in handling SRU accounts: (i) actual expenditure may prove very different from original budgeted expenditure; (ii) centrally recommended methods of costing and levels of costing are frequently challenged by the SRU; (iii) accounts have gone into debit without adequate explanation; (iv) the salaries control account has been used for payment of staff where there is insufficient credit available. Paperwork and senior finance officer input (from Head of Financial Services and research accounts staff) is disproportionate to actual earnings.

* **staffing issues:** (i) links with Personnel have been unsatisfactory - again generating substantial paperwork and absorbing senior officer time. Frequently, SRU-linked issues require the Head of Financial Services, the Director of Research and Consultancy and the appropriate Personnel officers in multiple phone calls, discussions and notes of confirmation before problems can be unravelled. Examples of problems are: commitments made to part-time research support staff before approval system is cleared; arbitrary setting of pay levels - with technical skills being rewarded more highly than intellectual skills; appointments are frequently presented to Personnel as a fait accompli when staff have already started; i.e. non-compliance with equal opportunities relating to appointments procedures (ii) relationships between Director of SRU and his staff presents a history of difficulties and there is evidence of a loss of confidence among SRU workers; this is related to the style of leadership and the nature of the input to projects from JFH.

* **management issues:** (i) despite the formal requirement for SRU to report through an advisory group to Faculty Board this has not happened; until the 1978-85 record of activities was produced by staff in the unit there was no formal statement of SRU's activities; the advisory group does not meet; (ii) the relationship with the Research Development Office and the Director of Research and Consultancy is particularly difficult; in 1986, an attempt was made by DMW using the good services of the then HOD, RM, to regularise this situation; following a discussion of interpersonal problems it was proposed, then, to review and, if appropriate, extend the functions and utility of SRU; JFH failed to seize this opportunity and support the review which was to have started at Faculty level with DMW maintaining a watching brief; since that time, JFH has continued to challenge the authority of the Director of Research and Consultancy - on advice to the Faculty Research Committee; on ways of responding to research initiatives; on the costings of proposals; on the implementation of PNL Research Policy (in particular, the levying of overheads); on the content of the Research Review. This has produced thick files and has diverted attention from urgent RDO development matters.

* **SRU modus operandi:** (i) the specialist skills of JFH addresses only a narrow part of the research process and other skills must be "bought in" - for proposal writing; substantive research; report-writing (eg DMW/SMP wrote the proposal in 1980 for the largest contract SRU ever won - DHSS, Old People's Homes; DMW managed the project with a team of up to 10 people; and DMW/SMP/LAK have written all subsequent reports from this study); where a team is organised as a coherent whole, this can work well; but where there is partial delegation and task-sharing without adequate supervision problems can arise (cf Hackney Ethnic Elderly; Londoners' Living Standards); (ii) the traditional and hierarchical managerial style of JFH has made it difficult to retain staff - particularly women staff - and has sometimes antagonised outside groups (eg Haringey Women's Employment Collective) ; as a response to the latter, a different kind of unit, CRAC, was formed; (iii) the undue emphasis on technical skills and data-management at the expense of content and relevance has proved unhelpful both to staff who are substantive researchers and to clients (eg staff plus DHSS liaison officers in Old People's Homes project - hence, the setting-up of CESSA).

Two Specific Problems during 1985-1987

1987 Student Survey / Hackney Ethnic Elderly

ONE: 1987 Student Questionnaire

In Spring 1986, ACB noted the disparity between forms of course evaluation/consumer response by students in different faculties. The Director of Research and Consultancy advised ACB that SRU had appropriate skills for designing a PNL-wide survey and analysing/reporting on student responses. Accordingly, SRU was commissioned and 1986 students completed the questionnaires provided; a 100 page report emerged in December, 1986.

The SRU was approached by the Assistant Academic Registrar and asked to submit estimates for conducting a follow-on study for 1987 students. A proposal costed at £23,276 was submitted.

In the ensuing correspondence involving the Deputy Director and the Assistant Director, the Head of Financial Services and the Polytechnic Secretary, the Dean, Head of Department, Director of Research and Consultancy and the Director of the SRU a number of issues arose: (i) there was apparent over charging for input from JFH; (ii) an exaggerated cost was given for student support to the project; (iii) an inflated account of the skills required for the task was offered; (iv) a claim (which has yet to be substantiated) regarding unpaid overtime was made. In essence, this episode has demonstrated that irrespective of the original aims of the SRU, technical support for activities which are regarded as PNL priorities cannot be made available without a

Two: Hackney Ethnic Elderly

A project commissioned by L.B.Hackney Social Services Department, in Spring, 1985 requested policy research on the needs of elderly people from ethnic minority groups in the borough. A thick dossier charts the course of this work from formulation to culmination, with a rejection from the sponsor of the final project report. The Secretary for PNL took expert advice on (i) the quality of survey work/reporting; and (ii) the contractual position. A settlement was reached, resulting in a loss to the Polytechnic of £7,888.

Among the comments made by the Director of Research and Consultancy in December, 1986 were the following: (i) the terms of the project were couched in a set of correspondence rather than in a recognised proposal format; (ii) too many people were involved: JFH designed the project; NOP interviewed; AW did analysis/drafting; PC provided the LA political/intellectual input; SMP offered a gerontological perspective; (iii) the failure to provide interviewers from ethnic minority backgrounds was dealt with in a cavalier manner; (iv) the report contained no proper introduction and no policy implications (even when re-written) and the language was often impenetrable; (v) the internal correspondence prepared by JFH subsequent to disagreements occurring with LBH contain statements about the sponsor which are extremely worrying and raise serious questions about SRU's ability to relate to external agencies.

This kind of project breakdown is unprecedented at PNL and raises important matters of SRU accountability.

Discussion

Since SRU was established during the late 1970's circumstances have changed. In PNL, as in all institutions of higher education, different activities are coming under closer scrutiny as we assess their productivity and the kind of contribution they can make towards Polytechnic goals in the educational world of the 1990's. Importantly, those activities which are valued and which secure continuing support are the ones which through an internal process of critical review, and adaptation to changing needs, have ensured their continuing relevance and high quality over the years. It is against this backcloth that the current programme of SRU research work should be measured. The failure to undertake a programme review during the course of ten years and the absence of a framework of accountability points to the fact that present arrangements are unsatisfactory. Undoubtedly, a continuation of funded research in Social Studies is necessary; however, evidence suggests that this is more likely to be attracted by other research groups in the Faculty. Technical advice and support is needed: but in a more accessible form than that presently provided by SRU. Response to outside bodies is needed - but, again, that may now be offered more readily by other research groups. In sum, if there is to be a continuation of the SRU then a new formula is required, specifying activities, and targets, and establishing clear lines of accountability within the Polytechnic.