

Social Science Researchers in New Zealand (non-academic based)

A report on a summer studentship by Ainslie Gee (2008 – 2009)

This project came out of research previously done by BRCSS (Building Research Capability in the Social Sciences), which has included prior studies such as “Mapping the Social Sciences: Characteristics of new Zealand Academic Research Outputs” and the “National Survey of Social Scientists” (2006, 2008). The next move was to consider examining exactly who are New Zealand’s non academic social scientists with a probable assumption that there may be a substantial amount of social research work being completed by these folk.

This study in particular tapped into many of the areas in which BRCSS indicates it aims to make a contribution: New wealth creation and distribution systems in a globalised context; Social justice and development; The transmission of wealth / knowledge in a context of demographic change; Sustainability of diverse households and communities and settlements; Building e-research networks in the social sciences: perhaps especially this last category. By the end of this study this will occur primarily through examining a group of researchers in New Zealand who are often unseen, yet potentially making a considerable contribution to many areas of society.

The BRCSS AUT 2008-2009 Summer Scholarship focused on beginning a piece of research establishing who the non-academic based social science researchers in New Zealand are, what are their characteristics? What work do they accomplish? How do they interact with the academic and non-academic research users? How has their work has changed and is predicted by themselves to change? Of note is that ‘non academic social researchers’ includes researchers working for themselves, private firms, government agencies, non-government organisations and others (for example crown research institutes).

Initially as part of the background research for the project, a number of areas were examined including existing BRCSS research on academic social scientists; 2001 Census data on New Zealand university graduates qualifications by discipline; ‘census’ data examining how much Research and Development is being done by firms in New Zealand; some overseas research on related occupations, occupational identity & studies assessing doctoral students preparedness for career pathways in the social sciences.

The methodology for the project was rather simple in principle – quite simply we were to identify a list of independent consultants, and firms as potential survey respondents. From this and a further piloting sample we began to identify a group of people or firms to be invited to participate in an online survey. Next the online survey was developed – two web-based questionnaires: one for individuals social science researchers and another for firms. Once this was complete, the questionnaires were to go live and the results to be analysed. My role was up until the questionnaires went live on the net.

In identifying a list of independent consultants and firms as potential survey respondents, I began by searching for names of people and/or firms, (using the Yellow pages and Google) and obtaining material from various websites including: www.theclearinghouse.com; www.google.com; www.nzsearch.com;

There were also a number of 'other' contacts located through various personal contacts, and web based searching (other includes government agencies, NGOs, Associations), totaling 236 for an initial list.

In conjunction with the intentional web based searching, a series of snowballing type advertising occurred – these included advertising at conferences; website advertising; online email networks and newsletters; and generating interest through generic networking. These contacts are still coming in and being added to the list, and offers to advertise the research are still being offered hence the final survey list is continuing to grow.

I had to develop two questionnaires that would eventually be put on line as surveys for participants to answer. Initially the first basic questions came primarily from the BRCSS social science questionnaire, a book titled "The Social Scientist in American Industry" (Radom, 1970), census research and development data, and a questionnaire used for research by the University of Sydney (others included doctorate tracking studies). From these initial questionnaires I began to develop headings from the questions these included: 'your role', 'your work as a social scientist'(research, evaluation, knowledge transfer, collaboration), 'awareness of BRCSS', 'academic background and involvement', and 'about you'. Headings for firm questionnaire included: 'main goals', 'recent work programme', 'background', 'staff', 'costs/income sources', 'resources/facilities', 'management/ownership arrangements', 'links', 'change', and 'general'.

As these questionnaires were developing from draft to draft, it was apparent that feedback on the questionnaires was needed. 1 face-to-face interview and 3 surveys were completed and returned via email. While this feedback is still being generated some general themes have emerged e.g.: establish greater clarity around the definitions of organisation versus firm versus consultancy and hence who fits which questionnaire; clearly providing information on the purpose for the research for participants; and allowing space for participants to discuss larger issues around the sector in which they work.

There were a few issues that arose during the time I worked on the project. The first was that there wasn't a lot of existing data from which to build a research literature review, to examine for methodology, to locate potential ideas for contacts etc. There appeared not to be a localized example of any sort and barely an example internationally that was similar hence a lot of what we were doing was trial and error and there weren't easy examples to access and follow. However through using what we could find and access and expanding on what we could consider as relevant we were able to find a reasonable amount of information. Similarly with contacts, through the process of locating who we could, and allowing the snowballing time to happen we have come up with a reasonable list.

Secondly, the title 'social science researcher' or 'social scientist' isn't one that some of those outside academia necessarily frequently identify with or would use as a self descriptor. Hence I suspect that we may have missed some of our target audience, at tracking down others proved to be difficult at times. None-the-less, through offering people the opportunity to participate with adequate information about what the study is hoping to capture, and allowing people to self identify – or not – through that process.

A third issue that continued to arise was the question 'why would social scientists participate – what's in it for them'? Particularly through the piloting feedback – some people indicated that particularly

given that they are independent contractors, their time is very precious and that they would be much more inclined to participate if they were to see some personal business reward such as networking opportunities for themselves through their participation. One person even suggested the possibility of a networking community of likeminded peers who often tend to work in isolation. However it was also suggested that the acknowledgement of what they are doing, producing and contributing as social researchers was validating and there was a definite interest in the results.

This research project has been a somewhat daunting experience for me – however coming to the end of it has made me realize that it has been the first piece of academic based research I have been involved with. The concept of the non academic researcher – particularly in the social service settings is one which I am familiar with and one which I have been asked to step up and participate or lead previously and hence this summer studentship has been a big learning curve for me. I have learnt that research does not happen in strictly a linear sequential steps, but is a much more fluid process – which can involve lots of revisiting. I was given opportunities to practice writing and a few in conducting an interview, I developed questionnaire construction skills, I further developed my networks and developed my presentation skills. I developed my time management organisational skills somewhat and I spent my summer doing something different and enjoyable.

I really would like to make a point of thanking a few folk who made this experience possible for me, firstly BRCSS and AUT university, secondly the people who made themselves available for interviewing, and finally Professor Charles Crothers – who is eternally patient!