Using research to assist policy implementation: A case study

Tony Anderson\(^5\)

and

Helen Scott\(^6\)

Abstract

The political imperatives which drive policy directions in vocational education and training (VET) usually demand a fast policy implementation response. Despite calls to link research into policy and practice there is rarely sufficient time to design and carry out systematic research to assist policy implementation. At the policy implementation stage pressing research questions are typically: What types of data are needed and how can these data be collected and analysed in time to be of use? This paper describes how research techniques were adapted or 'fast-tracked' to assist the development, by TAFE NSW, of an action plan for the implementation of a state-wide Ministerial policy relating to access and equity.

In their examination of research needs in vocational education and training McDonald (et al. 1993) found that the links between research, policy and practice were weak. The need to link research into policy formulation and implementation - the policy, research, practice continuum - has also been identified by Ramsey (1992), Crump (1993) and McGaw, (1996). Interest in the implementation phase of the policy process has revealed a need to know more about the kinds of research techniques that can be used to assist policy implementation.

The policy formulation process in the current political context is invariably bound by tight time constraints. The challenge for policy-oriented research is to obtain the necessary data in time for it to be of use. The requirement that policy-oriented research produce information within specific time constraints, contrasts with the 'pure' research where the researcher's ideal is that 'research should last for a long as it take to achieve the answer, or test the hypothesis (Wiltshire, 1993).

This paper describes how research methods were adapted to assist the development of an Action Plan which educational and training agencies including TAFE NSW were required to develop for the implementation of the 1994 NSW Government policy statement Achievement for Everyone: A Strategy for Equity in Education and Training in New South Wales (hereafter referred to as the State Equity Strategy).

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\(^5\) Educational Policy and Research Unit, Educational Development Division, TAFE NSW.

\(^6\) Policy Unit, TAFE NSW.
The State Equity Strategy aimed to shift access and equity policy at a state level away from only focusing on designated target groups. It signalled an inclusive approach to access and equity. The Strategy aimed to address the needs of students regardless of their race, culture, language, religion or other factors by removing systemic and institutional barriers and improving programs and services. Its implementation required TAFE NSW to develop, in a short period of time, a Plan of Action to achieve outcomes relating to:

- the dismantling of barriers to access;
- the successful participation in vocational education and training; and
- the successful continuation and provision of lifelong learning.

The Plan of Action was to be based around strategies to achieve outcomes specified by the State Equity Strategy and was to include responsible officers and indicate timeframe for achievement.

Hogwood and Gunn (1989) identified nine typical, though not prescriptive, stages through which a policy issue may pass. Their nine stages are listed below with Stage 7 marked as the stage at which TAFE NSW was required to act. This determined the selection of research techniques.

1. Deciding to decide (identifying the problem or issue or deciding to deal with an issue which has got onto the 'political agenda'. This is crucial to the remaining stages of the policy process);
2. Deciding how to decide (deciding how the decision should be made);
3. Issue definition (separating and identifying the various strands of a problem);
4. Forecasting (looking at how a situation might develop given different assumptions about the development of both problems and policies);
5. Setting objectives and priorities (and the relative priorities of various objectives competing for limited resources);
6. Option analysis (appraising and comparing options to achieve given policy objectives);
7. Policy implementation (THE FOCAL POINT FOR THIS PAPER);
8. Evaluation and review (has the policy been successful in achieving the outcomes desired; are there other contenders for resources elsewhere in the organisation; or does the present policy still merit priority or should it be downgraded or terminated?);
9. Policy maintenance, succession, or termination.

Although research can have a role in the first eight stages listed above, we are concerned with Stage 7: Implementation. Policy implementation, which includes monitoring and control, is viewed by Hogwood and Gunn (1989:9) as part of the larger process of policy making. They note that policy formulation and policy implementation are interdependent and that the interaction between the two is often
very complex (1989). They argue it is essential for policy implementation that potential problems be considered in advance. In their discussion of implementation they distinguish between non-implementation (a policy is not put into effect as intended) and unsuccessful implementation (a policy fails to produce the intended outcomes) (1989:197). We note also that Bowe and Ball (1992) and (Ball 1990) propose that this latter type of implementation could be more readily understood as part of the contextual influence that changes policy intentions and the relative roles of policy actors as it is implemented. Policy can be made and remade in different contexts.

The Plan of Action developed by TAFE NSW was required to address the principles set out in the State Equity Strategy Policy Statement (Achievement for Everyone: A Strategy for Equity in Education and Training in New South Wales). These principles called for the use of a broad consultative process to arrive at strategies, targets and performance outcomes. The work of drafting the Plan of Action was carried out within the TAFE NSW Policy Unit for the Equity Strategy Group (described later). The methodology used to collect data to assist development of the Plan of Action is described next.

1. Criteria for selection of research techniques

As noted above, the Plan of Action was to contain strategies by which performance outcomes were to be achieved and was to show responsibility and timeframe. To have stated strategies in the Plan which promised more than TAFE NSW could deliver would have been self-defeating: the system would fall short in delivering the required outcomes. The choice of research technique was shaped by the need to obtain information to assist the development of strategies for achievable outcomes within realistic timeframes. The research techniques had to meet two criteria, in particular:

a) the research had to channel a particular kind of knowledge to the policy officer writing the draft Plan. This had to be practical, commonsense knowledge of experienced practitioners of what works (and avoidance of what does not work); knowledge derived from trial-and-error learning and intimate knowledge of the subtle constraints on delivery posed by the TAFE NSW system including the sheer diversity of the client base of TAFE NSW; and

b) the knowledge had to be obtained very quickly. This necessitated that it be in a form which would enable common themes to be easily extracted.

2. Data collection method and limitations

The main forms of data used in the drafting of the Plan of Action were

a) analysis of policy documents and management plans; and

b) interviews with selected TAFE NSW access and equity stakeholders. These stakeholders were TAFE officers directly involved in access and equity. They possessed considerable experience of policy implementation for their constituent groups, including what works and what does not work; best
described as 'how to' knowledge. They could all draw upon experience gained from wide spheres of management responsibility and could access the knowledge of staff in operational networks close to the point of delivery.

The lack of time to collect data from students was a limitation of this approach.

3. Interviews with key stakeholders

For the interviews it was necessary to ensure a cross-sectional representation of views of the major access and equity advisory groups. The list of stakeholders to be interviewed included:

(a) the heads of the four TAFE Equity Units: the Women's Education and Training Coordination Unit, the Disabilities Services Unit, the Multicultural Education Unit and the Aboriginal Development Division;

(b) the three Educational Training Divisions which focus on a range of access programs and services including language, literacy and numeracy programs across all training areas. These were the Foundation Studies, Basic Work Skills and Pre-Vocational Programs Training Divisions;

(c) the convenor of the Curriculum Strategy Group; the peak decision-making body on curriculum policy for TAFE NSW; and

(d) the head of the Human Resources Division (focus on staff training issues).

4. The use of 'research questions' in the interviews

To manage the data collection quickly, each of the issues identified in the State Equity Strategy's three key areas for action were turned into research questions. In a research study, the 'research questions' are the questions which the research itself is attempting to answer, rather than, say, the questions which are asked of respondents in a research interview. However, the technique of using the research questions as a focus for an interview has been used in needs analysis research (Anderson and Jones, 1986:26). The technique entails stating the research question and then allowing the respondent to comment. The researcher's role when this technique is used is to try hard to understand the views of the person being interviewed and to ask questions to obtain clarification of those views. For example: in the key area of dismantling barriers the issue of inaccessible information was turned into a research question: stakeholders were asked what they were doing to reduce this barrier and what initiatives would yield a positive outcome in how this obstacle would be overcome. In other words, the question sought information about how to make any inaccessible information accessible to TAFE's clients and customers?

To speed up the data analysis phase a common basis was needed for the interviews. The same questions were asked of each stakeholder within the same context - that of the State Equity Strategy which respondents received beforehand. This allowed
information collected from the stakeholders to be directly compared and simplified the extraction of common themes from the interviews.

5. Data synthesis by content analysis of the interview data

The purpose of content analysis is to extract semantic units or themes for analysis and to note the frequency of occurrence of these themes. Content analysis, described by Lin (1976) as 'methodical measurement applied to text', can be conducted at the level of single words, phrases, paragraphs or other units or chunks of meaning. The formal procedure for carrying out content analysis, the preparation and methodical analysis of typed transcripts of interviews, was not followed due to tight time constraints. Instead, the data obtained during the interviews were translated into strategies for the achievement of the access and equity outcomes required by the State Equity Strategy Policy Statement. In doing this, careful consideration was given to the analysis of internal TAFE NSW policy documents and/or management plans.

The strategies developed by this approach had the following general characteristics:

- they encapsulated knowledge for the achievement of access and equity outcomes within TAFE NSW which were known to be needed, effective and achievable; and
- taken together, they gave wide coverage of the important issues; reducing the chance of overlooking an important implementation issue in developing the Plan of Action.

6. Concurrent and complementary actions

Concurrently, a descriptive review of access and equity legislation, policy and research was undertaken. Although this was not completed within the allocated time frame for the development of the draft Plan of Action some of the knowledge which emerged from this analysis was able to be used as a kind of additional 'double-check' when reading early drafts of the Plan of Action. This ensured that there were no important matters relating to legislation, policy or the research findings that might have changed the thrust of particular strategies written into the Plan.

7. The shape of the implementation Plan of Action

As noted previously, the policy response was required to be in the form of a Plan of Action. In its first draft form this was set out in terms of outcome, strategy, responsibility and timeframe. For example, in the draft Plan the achievement of the outcome: Physical access to TAFE facilities is provided for all students, was addressed by two strategies:

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1. Implement guidelines and strategies to enable people with disabilities to apply, enrol, attend and participate in their chosen courses and Institute activities.

2. Apply Australian Standard 1428 - Design for Access and Mobility to planning and upgrading of facilities.

The responsibility and timeframe for achievement of the outcome were also specified. For the Plan of Action in general the timeframe was kept deliberately broad to allow for maximum flexibility in internal management and planning to achieve the outcomes of the Plan. The responsibility for outcomes was deliberately kept at a corporate level; fulfilling the requirement of responding to the policy statement as a government policy while retaining the responsibility to make internal decisions on operational and implementation matters.

8. Review of the draft Action Plan

The key committee for access and equity policy matters in the TAFE NSW at the time when the Plan of Action was developed was the Equity Strategy Group. This peak advisory group included senior TAFE Institute representatives, and representatives from all TAFE equity units and the Educational Training Divisions. The Equity Strategy Group reviewed the first draft of the 'action plan' and requested that it be streamlined. This was carried out by a Working Group who examined the various action themes against an overarching reference question: what should be really valued in implementing access and equity in TAFE NSW? The final review and 'signing-off' was also undertaken by the Equity Strategy Group, before the TAFE Plans of Action along with those of other agencies were put out for community consultation by the former Ministry office.

Limitations of the case study

The research data obtained in this project was limited in that it was derived almost entirely from stakeholders within the organisation. An improvement, had resources been available, would have been to link the data from the internal stakeholders to an analysis of the specific needs of groups within the external community, including students. If that had been done, again the tight time constraints would have confined data collection to the use of group process research techniques, such as the Search Conference method which typically engages a cross-section of stakeholders, around thirty persons, in a workshop lasting 1-3 days which begins with a 'future scan' and moves through identification of issues and then the action plans to resolve them (see Anderson and Jones, 1996). The information from one or more Search Conferences would then be used to validate or counterbalance the data derived from the internal stakeholders.

In the example given, the time constraints for the development of the TAFE NSW Plan of Action for the implementation of the State Equity Strategy required research to become a contiguous rather than a preparatory phase in the policy
implementation process since work on the Plan of Action had to start before any empirical research to support its development could be initiated inside TAFE NSW.

Conclusion

This paper has given an example of how research can be used to assist policy implementation when time is short. The research techniques can be summarised as

a) the systematic collection of information from a broad consultative process using 'research questions' to capture 'how to' knowledge from experienced practitioners; and

b) the synthesis of this information using content analysis techniques and document analysis techniques to develop strategies, targets and timeframes in a Plan of Action for the achievement of the specific access and equity outcomes specified in the State Equity Strategy policy statement.

When time is short, the policy specialist becomes the researcher and the role of the research consultant becomes one of working side by side with the policy specialist, adapting research methods to suit the information needs of the policy process. The research consultant in this role needs a broad knowledge of research methods, what they do, what they cannot do, how long they take to apply and what resources, human and financial, are needed to carry them out successfully.

References


