

CONNECTING POLICY, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE: WHAT DOES IT MEAN IN PRACTICE?

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Abstract

In this paper we discuss a case study-based methodology for evaluation and policy development within the Department of Labour (DoL), which was jointly developed with the Centre for Research on Work, Education and Business (WEB Research) between 1997-2002. We illustrate the particular role of research in bridging policy and practice, and discuss our experiences in developing and using this methodology to understand the systemic linkages between regulation, firm behaviour and policy.

By using a developmental research approach (Engestrom, 1996), distributed teams and the co-construction of research tools, the case study-based research and evaluation methodology has generated expansive learning cycles (ibid.) for government agencies, researchers and stakeholders. Examples are drawn from the work undertaken by the Department of Labour and WEB Research, in particular evaluating Accident Insurance and Employment Regulation. The paper examines some of the methodological issues and challenges involved in such an approach; as well as the implications for processes of policy formation, and for contract and project management.

Introduction

The initial impetus for the Department of Labour (DoL) to undertake case study-based evaluations stemmed from the need to continue its journey towards developing evidence-aware policy. In addition to standard research practices, DoL has been keen to explore a more bottom up, practice oriented, qualitative approach to build on its understanding of workplaces. Through case study-based evaluations, attempts are being made to investigate what is *actually* happening at workplaces and allow for that information to flow back to policy in a meaningful way. Traditionally, government departments have tended to either undertake evaluations in house (internal evaluations) or contract the evaluation out (external evaluations).

The research teams in the Department, along with the Centre for Research on Work, Education and Business

(WEB Research)², have experimented with a different way of doing case study based evaluations. We have worked towards developing a collaborative model (where government agency research and policy staff are mixed with external research practitioners) that offers a unique opportunity for working together. Through this paper we would like to share our experiences of ‘grounded methodology development’³ and the lessons learnt; and we would like to begin a dialogue with practitioners, policy makers and researchers about the usefulness of this approach and its implications for policy formation. In the past five years teams within the DoL⁴ have undertaken 13 research and evaluation projects with WEB Research, using a case study approach. In this paper we discuss the approach through illustrations from two research

¹ The views expressed in this paper are of the author and do not represent the views of the Department.

² In a number of the projects, the WEB Research team has included our Research Associates, Richard Bird, Owen Harvey and Bob Williams. We want to acknowledge their substantive contribution to the development of the methodology

³ One of the authors coined this term following Glaser and Strauss’ notion of ‘grounded theory development’.

⁴ These projects have been undertaken in collaboration with MED, ACC, OSH and LMPG. We would like to acknowledge their substantive contribution to the development of the methodology.

projects in the areas of accident insurance and employment relationships (see Appendix 1).

These were:

1. The ACC case study research project (1999-2001), which aimed at examining how firms have responded to the opportunities provided by the 2000 Injury and Accident Prevention Act, and the reasons for that response⁵.
2. 'The Effects of Employment Regulation case study research' (1999-2000), which aimed at learning about the effects of employment regulation on how firms organised their employment relationships.

What we are aiming to do through this paper is to:

- Share our experiences
- Offer an alternative way of doing this type of research that is both useful and enriching.
- Generate discussion about the value of such an approach for policy formation.
- Identify some of the critical challenges so that those of you planning to embark on this journey can be informed by our experiences.

In the next section of the paper we briefly discuss the policy context for the projects. In the following section, we describe our overall case study-based approach. We then examine what such an approach has meant for policy development and for contact and project management, before concluding with some overall reflections on our learnings.

Policy context

The Labour Market Policy Group is a policy house and its core area of work is offering policy advice to the Minister on accident insurance and workplace health and safety policy, employment policy, employment regulatory policy and immigration. In order to offer excellent policy advice an in-house research and evaluation team has been set up to offer the empirical knowledge base for policy making. In this respect, evaluation is generally treated as a component of the 'policy advice' output provided to Ministers, rather than an output of its own.

Turner and Washington (2000) identify three key questions that policy makers often want answered from evaluative activities:

- What? – What is happening? What are the facts? What do we see?
- So what? – What do we think about this? What does it mean?
- Now what? – What do we need to do about this? What action should we take?

⁵ This was a longitudinal case study research initiated when ACC was privatised.

Exploring these key questions allows policy makers to anchor the *polycyscape* in the actual activity of firms and communities of practice.

It also emphasises the importance of understanding the systematic linkages between legislation, policy and organisation behaviour, and the need for this understanding to be reflected in the quality of policy advice offered.

Our approach

In this section we discuss what we mean by ‘collaborative work’ and how we believe this approach helped to bridge the policy-practice gap often seen in government agencies. We also examine the issue of what constitutes an appropriate unit of analysis for research evaluations that explore these systemic linkages.

The two projects, which evaluated the impact of accident insurance and employment policies, posed the following research challenges for us:

- They involved complex, rapidly-changing environments. For example, the ACC project straddled three different policy environments in which firms and organisations operated over the three year evaluation (1999-2001) – ACC monopoly, privatisation of the accident insurance market, and post-privatisation.
- There were multiple voices and actors, multiple agencies and stakeholders. For example, the ACC evaluation required us to understand a range of perspectives that included senior and middle managers, health and safety staff, injured employees; staff from case management companies; insurance companies and brokers.
- Information (data) that was relevant to the two evaluations derived from both those who were affected by the policies and regulations (e.g. the owners and managers of firms, their staff and their representatives), and those who made and implemented the decisions (e.g. policy makers, ACC and OSH regional staff).
- For all these reasons, the evaluations required us to understand the ‘whole system’ so that the unit of analysis, was the worksite in its relationship to head office, industry, unions, employer groups, policy agencies; in other words, the relevant ‘activity system’ (Engestrom, 1996). Early on, in the ACC study, for example, we carried out scoping interviews with ACC staff in head office, then focused our research attention on the firm. Subsequent reflections led us to rethink the ‘case’ and take a more systemic approach to the firm – our focus then became the firm in its relationship to other ‘systems’ such as the case management system, financial and risk management system, and the health and safety management system. In doing so, we were recognising that *‘there is a great deal of critical evidence held in the minds of*

both front line staff and those to whom policy is directed' (SPMT, 1999).

- As a consequence, we needed to draw on multiple sources of data, frameworks and literatures. For example, in the employment regulation study, which was carried out during the period of the Employment Contracts Act, we needed to draw on both aggregate macro-economic data at the national and industry⁶ levels, as well as qualitative socio-economic and industrial relations data at the firm level.

We responded to these challenges in two ways:

- (a) We set up 'distributed teams' to work together throughout the research process (e.g. in fieldwork at work-sites; during analysis). This involved deliberately structuring the team formation process to include members who crossed the boundaries among disciplines, experience, units within one locations. Team members came from diverse backgrounds (economists, sociologists, anthropologists, practitioners, lawyers, operational staff, and evaluators) as well as from a policy and/or research focus. This meant challenging each others' assumptions or mental models and learning from each others' experience and data.
- (b) We also created a forum for engaging stakeholders in dialogue about the emergent analysis. For instance, in the ACC study, we involved firms, policy agencies and other stakeholders in sense-making during analytical workshops. In one workshop, senior policy officials from the DoL and the ACC struggled to make sense of the emergent findings along with senior managers from three large organisations: a city council, a telecommunications company, and construction company; a medium-sized chicken hatchery, and a small provincial metal manufacturing firm.

At the same time, we collectively generated the learning about the methodology and methods, as the team members progressively grappled with their different understandings of the research process. In other words, we learned by doing, and reflected on this in team meetings, with input on research methodology threaded into the actual project work. For example in the employment regulation study, team members from the research agency who had a long history in working with case study research in firms and organisations carried out in-house tutorials using 'real-life' data and situations.

⁶ The Effect of Employment Regulation: Case study Research in the Accommodation, Winemaking and Brewing industries, occasional paper 1994/4 by LMPG and WEB

For all of these reasons, the series of case study projects can be thought of as creating cycles of knowledge creation, or 'expansive learning cycles', characterised by the following features⁷:

- We attempted to minimise the divisions between 'researchers' and 'researched'.
- Knowledge generation and learning was dispersed among all participants in the research. It was not just a matter of professional researchers 'coming to know'.
- Processes of learning and innovation at the site of research (in the policy-scape) were what the research is 'about'. In other words, learning occurred in 'real time' activity.
- At the same time, the research was also 'about' learnings that could be generalised across a number of settings.
- Differences, tensions and dilemmas were viewed positively as routes to new knowledge. As the theory of developmental work research shows (Engestrom 1996), the struggles that are created in the course of crossing the agency or disciplinary boundaries are potentially opportunities for innovation.
- Relevance and utility did not mean a sacrifice of intellectual engagement and theoretical insight.
- The insights about these ways of doing applied research, which are driven by the knowledge needs of government agencies, are cumulative and can be applied in other policy and non-policy settings.

What has this meant for policy development?

By establishing a distributed team of individuals with different skills, experience and disciplinary backgrounds as part of the research process, we were not only endeavouring to incorporate their different 'knowledges'. We were also trying to bring out fresh ideas and innovation in the policy development process. As Hargreaves (1998) argues, knowledge needs to evolve within the real world context in which it is applied. Teachers must 'tinker' with research findings to adapt them to practice in the classroom. Where it is properly supported, systematised and shared, 'tinkering' can lead to innovation. In the setting up of the collaborative case study approach, the aim was also to offer policy writers the opportunity to participate in the generation of evidence so that they could more easily adapt the 'findings' for use in their 'policy world practice'.

Thus an opportunity was created for two things: for policy writers to explore new understandings of

practice and to increase the probability of the research findings being used.

⁷ The authors want to acknowledge Rosemary du Plessis, Department of Sociology, University of Canterbury, for further developing our thinking about these features

Evaluation literature discusses different types of utilisation. In particular it draws a distinction between instrumental⁸ use (when research feeds directly into decision-making for policy) and conceptual use (when research contributes to change in the policymaker's understanding of a situation, provides new ways of thinking). The mix of the distributed teams yielded insights and a way of talking about issues that could not have been achieved if a single approach had been adopted for the research. Box 1 offers an example of how, in the employment regulation study, participating in the research process contributed to a change in the policymaker's understanding of employment relationships.

Box 1: Comments by a policy analyst on the team

The case studies on the effect of employment regulation were structured to provide insight into the role of regulation - compared with other influences - on employer and employee decisions and actions. Our reason for undertaking case studies was the lack of labour market analysis at a firm level. We wanted a sufficient spread of firms and experience to ensure that patterns could be established; these became our 'generalisations'⁹ that could be tested and applied in other research.

I was surprised at the shift in the nature of the employment bargains over the period of the 1990s - what others refer to as the 'psychological contract'. The recurring pattern on the employer and employee side was that loyalty was gone, particularly for young and precarious workers who had not experienced pre-Employment Contract Act days. Employers sought to develop employee loyalty through a variety of means - pep talks and training programmes, but the employees had a Tui's response - 'yeah, right'. Employers picked up where unions left off, or were left out. Employers felt the burden of responsibility and sought means of managing this burden through mutual support organisations both formal and informal. The degree to which employers had taken charge and to which employees accepted that shift was remarkable. These insights were useful when thinking about policy issues for the Employment Relations Act.

⁸ Four main types of research utilisation are: instrumental use, conceptual use, mobilisation of support and wider influence (adapted from Weiss (1998)).

⁹ Analytical generalisations rather than statistical generalisations (Yin, 1994).

Implications for contract and project management

The two projects that form the basis for this paper (in the context of the broader body of case studies carried out by the DoL and WEB Research, together with ACC, OSH and MED) are innovative in that they aimed to use the real experiences of firms as the model for policy, rather than basing policy on particular prior assumptions or disciplines.

However, there are some lessons that we learnt in our practice of using and further developing the methodology, that we would like to share with other practitioners, so that, hopefully, they can draw on our experience. Undertaking such a collaborative exercise can be challenging and project management can be extremely difficult. In this section of the paper we identify some of these challenges and share our learnings.

Maintaining contractual obligations

Given the iterative methodology of the case study approach, in which we built on one another's strengths and emerging ideas as we grappled with the data and our experiences in the field, it is difficult to have a straightjacketed contract. Conventional contracting models work when purchasing a service or a clearly defined product. In the process we are describing, where there is collaboration and the co-construction of research tools, the accountability lines are blurred. Moreover, the accountability tends to be to maintaining the integrity of the research process, not to the end product. Thus maintaining contractual obligations becomes quite difficult.

There are also issues relating to 'intellectual property rights' that need to be recognised and managed. All DoL contracts that use this way of working now state that:

The know how or techniques relating to data gathering, analysis and processing developed by you, or jointly by you and us in the course of this agreement, may be used, with acknowledgement, by either party in any way during or beyond this agreement.

Project management is complex and challenging

In this type of research, we are working in organisational environments of rapid change and a policy and research environment where the role boundaries are not always clearly divided along agency lines. We often cross the boundaries between disciplines, experiences and agencies, and so the project manager working on such projects needs to be a *boundary rider*. The right mix of skills for the project manager is therefore the key to the success of using this model of working - a person who can work with ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty.

In our experience, when people are not committed to a collaborative way of working as described, there is breakdown. In addition, the project manager has to simultaneously be task-oriented and process-oriented while working across the policy, research and workplace boundaries.

Composition of the project team

For all these reasons, distributed teams place enormous demands on team members as they have to come out of their comfort zone into territory that is new and challenging for all concerned. The process demands that everyone in the project team is considered equal – no matter what their ‘rank’ or position - and that their knowledge and experience can contribute equally, albeit differently, to solving the research problems at hand.

The assumption is that each member has knowledge, skills, capabilities or talents in a particular area that need to be identified and used effectively.

At the same time, we need to recognise that not all individuals prefer to work in this framework and so in some instances, a distributed team model is not an appropriate one. This recognition and acceptance of work preferences in a team is conducive to collaborative inquiry and problem solving.

Coping with uncertainty

Projects are not static. Changes can occur at many levels: project team members can change, the policy environment can change and/or the stakeholders can change. So, what happens when team members change during the life cycle of the project? Worse still, what happens if a new project manager comes on board who is not comfortable with this approach or style of working? In cross agency teams, members work in different environments and report to different managers, which challenges them to stay motivated and focused¹⁰. We have had experiences of all these scenarios and while we have managed to stay on course in some projects, we have had limited success in others. But because we are committed to this process of learning and working, we undertake individual and collective reflections to work through our actions.

¹⁰ We would like to acknowledge Kathryn Hazlewood and Diane Anderson for their inputs into these discussions.

Box 2: Coping with uncertainty in the ACC study

During the life of the ACC case study project, the policy context changed. We moved from a privatised environment to a monopoly scheme and this placed huge challenges for the evaluation strategy as a whole, and more specifically on the future of the longitudinal case study work. We managed to stay on course through on going consultation and dialogue with policy teams and focusing on how we can make the research relevant and useful for them in the new environment. The evaluation question shifted from an outcome orientation (in the private market) to a learning/exploration orientation (in the reversal to a monopoly scheme). We used our knowledge of the firms from phase one to learn about (a) how firms made the transition to the new environment (b) their responses to the opportunities presented by the new environment and (c) the implications of these response for future reforms for workplace injury and rehabilitation legislation.

Tools for managing distributed expertise team

Approaches and tools for managing this development process and the skills transfer have been developed jointly by the Department and WEB Research over time. Some that have been tried and tested are shared below.

a) Roles and responsibilities matrix (see appendix)

Undertaking a process to develop a roles and responsibilities matrix early on in the research helps in clarifying peoples’ expectations and surfacing any misunderstandings that may exist. The matrix acts as a guide for team members to clarify important relationships, the nature of those relationships, and responsibilities and accountabilities. Our experience suggests when a roles and responsibilities matrix is not undertaken until ‘crisis’, it’s use is limited because the underlying tensions and assumptions need to be dealt with first before moving forward.

b) Establishing effective and well-articulated communication plan

In working with distributed teams, it is important to begin by identifying what communication devices work or do not work for different members in the team. There is also a need to recognise what decisions do not lend themselves to an email discussion and hence need to be made face to face.

c) Paired interviewing

Interviewing in pairs is a useful technique for two reasons - for building robustness in the data gathering and analysis and allowing for transferring skills within the team. When pulling the data and observations together, the different perspectives help explore the

contradictions and differences and this contributes to improving the overall quality of the data and analysis.

It helps to pair individuals across different disciplines, agencies and levels of experience and skill in interviewing.

d) Involvement of respondents and stakeholders in the analytical process (where appropriate) to ensure rigour as well as opportunity for learning/sharing

Involvement of different stakeholders, case study participants, a range of policy agencies and researchers in the analytical process can be a formidable challenge, but also hugely satisfying. The process builds rigour into qualitative data analysis and brings different perspectives when making sense of the data. There are issues of confidentiality and patch protection that make such sessions difficult to co-ordinate. However, in our experience, making the analytical process transparent enables people to participate in knowledge generation rather than table thumping. Case study participants particularly have responded favourably to these sessions and value the opportunity to interact and listen to policy perspectives.

Conclusion

Interest in evidence-based policy and practice reaches into all areas of government and is attracting some attention within the policy arena. In this paper we have shown that a collaborative case study-based evaluation strategy is a valuable tool for policy agencies to consider in their journey towards evidence-aware policy formation. Clearly, the development of this approach is a 'work-in-progress' and thus open to debate and amendment. Its success or otherwise hinges on its practical application. We believe that the paper goes some way towards establishing a case for such an approach. Accordingly, we welcome contributions and debate. We would also welcome suggestions on how we can optimise the strengths of the methodology, while creatively handling the tensions involved in managing a distributed team approach.

Virkkunen and Kuutti (2000) have argued that the learning processes that operate in the incremental development of routines are very different from those that operate in situations of rapid change and complexity (*ibid.*). We wonder if their argument is also relevant to research and evaluation activities in situations of rapid change and complexity. Virkkunen and Kuutti make the point that in cycles of knowledge creation in such situations,

We have to focus more on the dynamics of learning ... For this we need a theoretical framework and a systemic unit of analysis that allows us to analyse the relationships between different elements in human activity (2000, p 298).

WEB Research has trialled developmental work research methods for use in policy formation processes in its collaboration with the DoL and other government agencies. Our experience of jointly undertaking case studies that attempt to capture the dynamic development of the different elements in 'whole systems' raises questions about the appropriateness of conventional research and evaluation approaches for rapidly-changing, complex situations. We believe that future research could profitably be directed towards applying, testing and further developing the collaborative, case study approach in other policy and organisational contexts of rapid change, complexity and uncertainty.

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Appendix 1: Description of the two projects

The illustrations that have formed the basis for this paper is the two case study based research undertaken in the Department of Labour. These were:

- (a) The ACC case study research aimed at examining how firms have responded to the opportunities provided by the 2000 Injury and Accident Prevention Act, and the reasons for that response¹¹.
- (b) The Effects of Employment Regulations case study research aimed at learning about the effects of employment regulation on how firms organised their employment relationships.

A brief description of each of these projects is offered in the following tables

(A) PROJECT ONE: CASE STUDY BASED ON RESEARCH ON THE CHANGES TO THE ACCIDENT INSURANCE POLICY (1999 AND 2000)

<p>Policy context The case study research was part of a broader evaluation strategy that was commissioned by the previous government. The Labour Market Policy Group was instructed to evaluate the ‘outcomes of competition’ on premiums and accident rates. The accident insurance evaluation strategy was then revised with the change back to ACC. The case study work with 20 firms was continued by the objectives of the research took on a more learning focus.</p> <p>Sources of data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Firm based interviews with management and staff• Document review at workplaces• Time series analysis of accident injury data using entitlement claims to examine trends in incidence number and cost of workplace accidents over time <p>The team</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Researchers from Department of Labour• Contract researchers (WEB)• Policy analysts working in Accident Insurance area• Learning organisation ‘expert’• Mix of social science research skills, economists, grounded theorists and sociologists	<p>Objectives of the research The aims of the research study were to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Examine in what way firms have responded to the opportunities provided by the Accident Insurance Amendment Act 2000 and the Accident Insurance (Transitional Provisions) Act 2000 (AI Act Reforms), and the reasons for their response.• Provide an assessment of what aspects of the recent reforms have been helpful and unhelpful to them.• Assess the implications of these responses for future reforms of workplace injury and rehabilitation legislation. <p>Analytical process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write up templates across interviews.• Analytical workshops with stakeholders, researchers, policy teams working in accident insurance area and case study participants.• Writing to understand the data.
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¹¹ This was a longitudinal case study research initiated when ACC was privatised. For the purposes of this paper we have provided a snap shot of the third phase of this research, but the learnings cover the three-year period.

(B) PROJECT TWO: CASE STUDY BASED ON RESEARCH TO EXPLORE THE EFFECTS OF EMPLOYMENT REGULATION IN THE ACCOMMODATION, WINEMAKING AND BREWING INDUSTRIES¹²

<p>Policy Context</p> <p>The Labour Market Policy Group provides strategy policy advice on labour market issues. An important question for policy advisors in the labour market area is: what effects do employment regulations (statutes, regulations and case law) have on the functioning of workplaces. While aggregate data is available, it does not provide a clear picture of effects. There was little research available that examined both employers' and employees' responses to regulation at the level of the workplace. LMPG felt it was important to understand what the effects of the regulation were to better inform Government of the consequences of the regulation. Hence, a case study based approach was undertaken to provide a rich, contextual description about the effect of employment regulation upon employment.</p> <p>Sources of data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interviews with peak organisation within each industry.• Industry data.• Employment contract data that was publicly available• interviews with firms.	<p>Objectives of the research</p> <p>The 3 questions the research aimed to provide insights about were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How did workplaces utilise their human resources to meet the needs of production.• What influences the choices of employers and employees in the employment relationships.• What part does the regulatory framework play in those choices? <p>Analytical process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Analytical workshops involving researchers, economists and policy analysts working in employment relations team. <p>Team members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mix of disciplines: economists, law, social science research skills
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¹² The Effects of Employment Regulation – case study research in the accommodation, winemaking and brewing industries by Labour Market Policy Group and Centre for Research on Work, Education and Business: occasional paper 1999/4 December 1999.

Appendix 2: Description of the two projects

Roles	People Responsible
1. Co-ordination - meetings, contracts, managing distributed team	
2. Research design and methodology (includes QA)	
3. Project meetings, facilitation, note taking, circulating material	
4. Development of the hypothesis and building the initial theory	
5. Fieldwork - arranging interviews, interviewing, writing up notes, debriefing, thankyou notes etc	
6. Analysis workshops	
7. Report writing to understand	
8. Report writing to communicate	
9. Ensuring integration of the project with the wider ERA evaluation	
10. Communication with other agencies/stakeholders	
11. Interface between Government employment relations policy and case study research	
12. Managing political implications	