

Building Ageing Research Capacity Colloquium

Research Development and Communication Processes Workshops

Morning Workshop 3 – Use of Consultants in Aged Care Research: Governments, Universities and the Private Sector

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Presented by:



ARC/NHMRC Research
Network in Ageing Well

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Use of Consultants in Aged Care Research: Governments, Universities and the Private Sector

Purpose of the paper

In recent years, there has been an increased tendency for governments and the private sector to contract out their research to external consultants. Many universities have participated in this trend by becoming contractors rather than the recipients of research grants. This trend has been particularly evident in the field of aged care, where prospective researchers have to keep careful watch on weekend newspapers or departmental websites if they wish to participate in aged care research funded by governments. The University of Wollongong's contracts to develop assessment mechanisms for the Home and Community Care Program (HACC) is a good example.

A number of private organisations, both for profit and not for profit, are also using consultants to undertake aged care research. Examples include the work carried out by LEK consultants for the Amity group of nursing homes comparing costs of residential care and community care, and Alzheimer's Australia's engagement of Access Economics to look at the costs to the community of Alzheimer's disease.

The increasing use of external consultants, as opposed to "in house" research or broad research funding for investigator initiated research, raises several issues relating to independence, need to please the customer, public availability of results, cost efficiency, and targeting of research.

The purpose of this paper is to stimulate discussion of these issues, with a view to improving the way consultants are used in aged care research and thereby obtaining better outcomes for the aged care sector.

1. WHY ARE EXTERNAL CONSULTANTS USED?

Cost

It is often claimed that it is cheaper to use external consultants than to employ staff.

This has rarely been tested, particularly now the employment of short term contract staff has become more common. The usual argument goes that it is inefficient for an organisation to have staff on the books for lengthy periods when the research project is relatively brief. The practice of employing short term temporary staff, however, tends to nullify the argument that the organisation is "stuck with" research staff when the project is completed, although engaging quality staff on a short term basis can be difficult.

Generally speaking, consultants' per diem costs are higher than the pay rates of employed staff, even when staff on costs are included. Tendering for contracts does tend to keep consultants costs down, but perhaps the estimated costs of doing the work "in house" should be considered alongside tenders from external consultants.

Limits on costs

It is often argued that using consultants keeps a tight limit on costs as the consultants are required to complete the task within the tendered price. However, well designed accounting systems and effective project control can also limit the cost of in house research. Perhaps smaller organisations operating on relatively small margins will be more diligent in ensuring that costs are kept within the set limits.

Setting strict price limits does not always ensure that these limits are adhered to. If the research is not completed within the prescribed cost, the organisation has the difficult choice of ending the contract with the work not completed, or paying extra to ensure completion.

Reduces time consuming management of the research

It is often thought that contracting out research avoids the need for in house project management. This, however, is only partly true. Most organisations find it necessary to allocate at least one person, often more, to oversee the project, liaise with the consultants, organise steering committee meetings, and other tasks associated with the research. Often when difficulties arise this project management role can be quite arduous.

Use of external research requires the organisation to have informed, knowledgeable and diligent staff so as to ensure the right questions are being asked and to enable effective translation of results into policy.

Internal management of consultancies is also crucial. Lax project management is often the cause of problems arising between the organisation and the consultant. This is even more important where it is difficult to specify exact project requirements in advance.

Need for specific expertise

Often, specific expertise does not exist within the organisation and it is hired from outside. This applies particularly to areas such as market research and testing of media materials, where consultants have available large databases or where methodological techniques such as sampling have been well and truly tested.

However, in some areas the consultants themselves do not have the expertise and they finish up subcontracting to experts who could just as easily been hired by the organisation at lower cost. This applies particularly in specific clinical areas where expertise in Australia is scarce.

There is sometimes a tendency to regard the consultant as the unquestionable expert in the field. Some form of critical evaluation, or peer review, of a consultant's report is a useful way of combating this tendency.

Independence

Contractors are often used when an organisation wants to convey the impression that the research is conducted "independently" of the contracting organisation. Of course such research is not strictly independent, as it is being funded by an organisation which usually has an interest in the results. Also, projects using consultants are usually subject to a "steering committee" whose job it is to ensure that the research is "on the right track".

The consultant on the other hand sees the organisation as a customer, and naturally has a desire to satisfy the customer, who may in the future have more contracts to offer.

These possible sources of bias are not of course limited to contracted research. Students are well aware of "the principle of positive results" whereby studies reporting a positive finding are likely to receive more credit and more publicity than studies that confirm the null hypothesis. There is also considerable pressure in research to conform to results found previously by eminent researchers. Sir Cyril Burt's findings on the role of heredity in intelligence went largely unquestioned for many years, until it was discovered the data was largely fictional.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that, for Governments and private organisations, using external consultants does improve the chances of research being more independent than in house research, as consultants (particularly those in tertiary institutions) will usually be judged by others in the field as to the quality of their work (if their work is ever published). Reputation is one of the most important factors in winning new contracts, and good consultants will be anxious to protect that reputation. In the longer term it is unlikely to be in the consultant's interests to "sell" their objectivity.

Distancing from the report

If the research report does in fact produce results that are unpalatable for the organisation, then the organisation can always distance itself from the report. Sir Humphrey, of Yes Minister fame, lists ten ways to discredit a report, all of which have been used in Government circles in Australia at some time or another. These include questioning the methodology, questioning the credentials of the consultants, questioning the relevance of the report, describing the report as out of date ("things have moved on since then"), and "the report poses more questions than it answers".

The ultimate distancing for either external or internal research is to withhold publication of the research, and not allow the researchers to publish or present results verbally. It is hard to know how often this happens, but happen it certainly does. Government Departments are required to list all consultancies in their annual reports. This can provide a basis for checking to see which consultants' reports have never appeared. Sadly there are several such listings in the area of aged care research where reports, assuming they have in fact been written, have never been publicly released.

Research not regarded as core business

Many organisations including Government Departments do not currently regard research as part of their core business. Goals and objectives for organisations are much more tightly written than used to be the case, and resources are allocated to "key priority areas". There is also a tendency to minimise risk in resource allocation, and research inevitably involves an element of risk. This leads to an ideological preference for contracting externally, where the research task can be narrowed down to fit the organisation's objectives.

2. WHAT ARE THE MAIN DANGERS OF CONTRACTED RESEARCH?

Insufficient specifications

A frequent complaint from organisations is that the consultants did not produce what was wanted. A frequent complaint from consultants is that the organisation was not clear about what it wanted and did not adequately spell out its requirements in the tender specifications or the contract.

Contracted consultants are only required to produce what is specified in the contract – nothing more, nothing less. Writing specifications for a research contract is a difficult task, as research tasks, particularly in aged care services research, are hard to pin down exactly. Often certain procedures (such as pilot testing or reliability and discriminability testing of instruments) are taken for granted and not spelled out. Often the progress of the research will indicate that a change of direction is desirable, or at least a modification of procedure. Sometimes changes in the research protocol can be negotiated with the contractors, though this may require an increase in funding.

One of the advantages of in house research is that it is easier to make changes in procedure and modifications to the research design. Care has to be taken however that the main objective of the project does not get lost in exploring the byways of interesting subsidiary issues. Flexibility has to be mixed with discipline.

“Quick and dirty” research

Because organisations will often choose a low priced tender, the consultant is often under enormous cost pressure to produce a result within budget. This often leads to corner cutting and following the shortest possible route to the result. Although tendered research does tend to force efficiency, it also runs the risk of finishing up with an inadequate methodology.

Sometimes the research question being asked only needs a “quick and dirty” approach. The contracting organisation, however, needs to be aware that this is the kind of research it is getting for the money it outlays. This in turn requires a degree of proficiency in assessing value for money

3. COMMISSIONED RESEARCH VERSUS INVESTIGATOR INITIATED RESEARCH

It is often claimed that investigator initiated research, where a funder only indicates the broad sector in which the research is to be carried out (eg health research) is superior to commissioned research, where the funding organisation determines the topic to be researched. The argument goes that it is only an informed researcher who knows precisely which research questions to ask. The example is sometimes quoted of Watson and Crick whose discoveries of the structure of DNA were made largely outside the specific field they were actually employed to work in.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC) still largely funds investigator initiated research, where significance and scientific merit are the only criteria. In recent years, however, NH&MRC has been delineating certain areas (such as dementia) where funds will be ringfenced.

The notion of investigator initiated research is often somewhat mythical, in that researchers are often constrained by their supervisors or the heads of their research establishments. Nevertheless, there is a case, particularly in aged care research, for a mixture of commissioned and investigator initiated research. Many of the advances in aged care over the last twenty years were based on research funded by the old Health Services Research and Development Grants (RADGAC) program which funded investigator initiated research. Anna Howe and George Preston’s work on dependency levels of nursing home residents, and Hal Kendig and colleagues’ project on health service use as part of the ageing and the family project are two such examples.

4. OWNERSHIP AND PUBLICATION

One of the vexed issues in externally commissioned research is the question of ownership. Australian Government contracts clearly state that any material flowing from the project is owned by the Australian Government, who also has the right to refuse publication of results. Commercial consultancy organisations usually have no problem with this stipulation, but universities have found it a real stumbling block. It is fundamental to the ethos of a university that its research be publicly available for critical comment and peer review. Governments tend to argue that as they have paid for the research it is theirs to own and to do with as it sees fit.

In actual fact conflicts are few and far between, and usually arise when the outcomes of the research have political implications for the Government. It is true that often Governments do not print large quantities of reports, but it is rare for an academic researcher to be prevented from publishing as long as there is due acknowledgement of the funding source.

There can, however, be attempts by the organisation to influence the way in which the report is written, the particular wording used, or the emphasis given to certain findings. Consultants have to balance the demands of the funder with the need for integrity in reporting the results of the project.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) is an interesting example of such a balance. Although it is a Government agency, it is established by a separate Act of Parliament which guarantees it considerable autonomy. At the same time it is often contracted as a consultant for Government Departments and is required to abide by terms of its contract. Over the years special arrangements have been devised for dealing with these potentially conflicting procedures. At one stage a Memorandum of Understanding was developed between the Department of Health and Ageing to cover all research arrangements between the Department and the AIHW which attempted to set out a protocol for handling research reports including publication.

Other informal arrangements have developed over the years involving an agreement for AIHW to comment on draft reports and point out statements which may cause problems for Government. AIHW has also agreed to give the Department reasonable notice of a public release so that Ministers can be well briefed. At the same time the AIHW reserves the right to publish material over the names of the researchers who did the work (with due acknowledgement of the funding source).

5. SUMMARY

The use of consultants carrying out contracted research is becoming more widespread, particularly in aged care research. Too often organisations have followed this trend without weighing up the pros and cons of external versus internal research.

Both in house research and investigator initiated research have led to valuable outcomes in the past, and there are strong arguments for maintaining a balance in the way research funds are expended.

When external consultants are used, the design of the request for tender, and the wording of the contract, are crucial to ensuring outcomes of value to the contracting organisation. Agreement also needs to be reached about publication of results, particularly where tertiary institutions are involved.

Properly managed, consultant based research can be a useful component of an aged care research program. The key factors for successful research consultancies are:

- the integrity of the consultant in maintaining a degree of independence from the funding organisation,
- consumer sovereignty – well-informed active client organisations who actively manage the project and view outcomes critically in the context of other work in the field, and
- shared, clearly articulated expectations, backed by solid well-written agreements, that still allow some flexibility.