

ESRC Non-Governmental Public Action Research Programme
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***“Bringing users in and
developing partnerships”***



“Bringing users in and developing partnerships”

- Introduction
- Who are the users?
- When do you bring them in?
- How do you do it?
- Different types of relationships
- Keeping them on board
- Having realistic expectations
- Developing appropriate outputs



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Introduction

- My background- academic; civil servant in central government; Director of Family Policy Studies Centre, a research charity; consultative work with NGOs; Chair of the Social Research Association and initiator of its Dissemination Working Group
- My users have included: academics; students; Ministers; select committees; senior policy officials in central government and agencies; policy advisers in think tanks etc; judges and lawyers; pressure groups; user representative bodies; service providers in the public and voluntary sector ; practitioners
- Working to produce a guide to good practice for the effective dissemination of social research



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Who are the users?

- The project team, possibly with the subsequent advice of the funder/commissioner/steering group, has to identify all possible users
- But you will need to distinguish between them in terms of who are the primary users, who are secondary and who else may ultimately be a user, for example of the deposited data
- Different types of users require different involvement strategies. It is important to clarify who are the most important and also whether there may be any conflict of interest between them
- If so, you will need to think how you balance competing demands
- You may be a user too



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When do you bring them in?

- Users have to be thought about from the very beginning of designing the project
- Some ‘primary users’ may be involved in design discussions and then throughout a project’s life as members of advisory groups, facilitating access etc or even as research team members
- More peripheral users may be identified early but not actively involved till later stages such as early findings



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How do you do it?

- Different methods for different types of users /projects
- Important to discuss this with ‘primary users’ so understandings of roles and expectations clear
- Part of the research team; access facilitator; member of steering group or management team; key disseminator



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Different types of relationships

- You will have different relationships with different users
- Your relationships with ‘primary users’ or ‘partners’ will be closer and more dynamic than those with ‘secondary users’.
- They are also more likely to experience problems which ‘matter’ and which take time [and diplomacy] to sort out
- Relations will differ over the life course of the project with all users



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Keeping them on board

- Long running projects can pose problems of keeping users involved if they are not part of the team or steering group
- This may be complicated by change of personnel either in the user organisation or sometimes in the research team
- It is better to think from the beginning how to keep users involved
- Methods depend on how many you have and their needs e.g. scheduled meetings; newsletter; circulation of interim reports; passported web site etc.



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Having realistic expectations

- Relationships or partnerships which work are based on realistic expectations
- This covers both what the user or researcher wants out of the project and what either side can do
- The closer the relationship with the user the more explicit you both have to be about clarifying this
- Remember time priorities are likely to be different – however committed the user is to being involved “the day job” almost always comes first
- So commenting on questionnaires or reports needs a lot of leeway on response times, for example



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Developing appropriate outputs

- It is crucial to a successful relationship with users to give them project outputs in the appropriate formats at the right time
- These formats may be very different from the formats you need for academic recognition
- So this has to be recognised from the design of the project and appropriate thought given to the skills and resources this will require
- Users may want : verbal presentations; web materials in exciting/pricy layouts; to use you to present findings to their key sponsors /funders; newspaper or magazine articles; TV and radio appearances etc
- They may want to assume control of the findings and present their own gloss on them in public dissemination
- They may want to disseminate before the findings are ready/ been peer reviewed and this can cause conflicts



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