

The dissemination of research on community relations: an Information Office in the Centre for the Study of Conflict

The efficient dissemination of research findings has notoriously been a problem for researchers. The Centre for the Study of Conflict has recognised the problem through the appointment of a Development officer, Mr C. McCartney, with the specific brief of encouraging the application of research findings to policy and practice. The Majority-Minority reports, recently launched from the Centre, have a similar aim.

There are two main obstacles to the successful dissemination of research findings. The first is that most research is published in specialist and disciplinary-narrow academic journals; consequently few people are in a position to be aware of the entire breadth of the field. The second obstacle is that research has traditionally not been widely disseminated. It is often difficult to express complex ideas in common language, and there are few outlets even for those who try to do so. Academics write mainly for other academics and this process encourages the use of a specialist vocabulary and approach.

These general problems apply equally to research on Northern Ireland's community problems. As a result, academic research often does not reach all the audiences which might benefit from it.

This proposal suggests that three main targets are not being presently addressed:

1. Policy makers.

It is clear that the traffic of research information to policy-makers varies greatly between different government departments. In-house research, commissioned by specific departments, circulates fairly freely within the commissioning department. There is little evidence that it is disseminated more broadly to other departments. The problem is even greater for research conducted outside government.

The insular approach to research appears to be greatest in the security field, including the NIO and RUC. It is a special problem for the Community Relations Unit, whose functions cut across departmental boundaries, and who would benefit greatly if more general circulation of up-to-date data were available.

2. Opinion leaders

There is a strong argument that the Northern Ireland conflict might have spiralled out of control years ago were it not for the social infrastructure which kept it together. This includes the churches; the media; local politicians; trade unionists; educationalists; statutory bodies like the CRC, SACHR, NIVT, NICVA and more recently the Community Relations Council; voluntary organisations such as community groups, reconciliation groups and youth organisations; the business community. Most of these important interests operate in ignorance of the great body of research which has been carried out into the nature and effects of the conflict.

More specifically, there is a need for reliable briefing materials on the background to the Northern Irish conflict. Such materials, periodically up-dated, would contribute to briefing and training the security forces, the police and visitors to Northern Ireland. Suitably presented, they would also make a valuable contribution to the encouragement of education for mutual understanding in schools.

3. Informed public opinion

There is an educated public which has the potential to play a more positive role in Northern Ireland. The best route to this population is through the media, and the best way of influencing the media to cover research findings is to disseminate them in a way which is attractive and accessible to them.

Researchers, especially those from Northern Ireland's two universities, have an important role in this process. So has the Community Relations Council, with its wide network in the community. The full involvement of both is needed to reach the targetted audiences.

Information Centre

This proposal is to improve the dissemination of research information on community relations by the establishment of an Information Centre at the Centre for the Study of Conflict and the appointment of an Information Officer. The main responsibility of the Information Officer will be the production of regular Conflict Research Briefings within the broader context of research dissemination. This broader context will include the task of building and maintaining a research data base. No such base exists at the moment. Its creation would provide up-to-date access to research information which would be accessible to researchers and policy makers.

Drawing from this base it will be possible to publish regular registers of research, and to contribute a regular research section to the Community Relations Council bulletin. The data base will also facilitate the production of background papers on the Northern Irish conflict, which can be used for training purposes, as background for EMU and for other purposes.

The duties of the Information Officer will include:

1. Data collection, editing, commissioning, publication and dissemination of research findings necessary for the publication of Conflict Research Briefings;
2. creating and maintaining a research resource base relating to community problems in Northern Ireland;
3. encouraging and advising researchers on the broader dissemination of research data;
4. the periodic production of registers on conflict research in Northern Ireland;
5. the coordination and preparation of copy for regular inclusion in the Community Relations Council bulletin;
6. the production of briefing materials on the background to the Northern Ireland conflict, for training and other purposes.

A steering committee will be created to supervise the activities of the Centre and the Information Officer. This will include representatives of the Centre for the Study of Conflict, CCRU/PPRU, the Community Relations Council and Queen's university Belfast. The central involvement of the CRC is essential to develop a close interchange between the information centre and the general community.

Conflict Research Briefings

The main responsibility of the Information Officer will be to initiate and operate a new information service. This will take the form of a series of Conflict Research Briefings. The aim is to provide up-to-date information on conflict-related research for those who make and those who influence policy in Northern Ireland. It will also provide an information link between academic researchers and policy-makers.

The briefings will concentrate on research which has some direct relevance to the contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland or another current political or social conflict. They will provide:

- a. details on publications arising from research activity;
- b. summaries of completed research reports;
- c. summaries, where possible, of in-house research by government departments, the NIHE and other statutory bodies;
- d. abstracts of relevant journal articles;
- e. details of new legislation;
- f. analyses of social policy data.

The briefings will be mailed free of charge to selected politicians, civil servants and others with an interest in policy: local politicians; administrators; academics; trade unionists, community and church leaders; journalists and major research funding agencies. Circulation will be mainly, but not exclusively, within Ireland and Britain.

The Information Officer will be assisted in this task by a list of reviewers, primarily academics but including researchers, public servants, journalists and others. Each contribution will be short enough to fit on to two sides of paper, typically not more than 500 words each in length. The briefings will be written in simple, concise, everyday language. Their primary aim is to summarise the main argument or findings of authors in a way that will catch the interest of non-academics. The main thrust of the findings should be indicated in the opening sentences.

The number of publications reviewed in each briefing will depend on the level of research activity, and should normally have appeared within the last year or so. Initially it is intended that briefings will be published twice a year, increasing to a quarterly basis. Publication will be in an inexpensive but professional format.

Decisions on publication will be the responsibility of the Steering group described above.

Costings

Research Officer/Information Officer 55,588*
(From 1.4.91 for three years, starting
Grade 1A, pt 7)

Recruitment costs 750

Publications (1 Research Register;
9 Research Briefings) 4,500

Dissemination, seminars etc. 1,700

Computer costs 1,500

Travel and subsistence 2,500

Total 66,538

University Overheads at 40% 26,615

GRAND TOTAL 93,153

*Nationally agreed pay awards will be an additional cost to the
project borne by the sponsor.

John Darby
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