

CHC08 Community Services
Training Package Version 4

CHCPOL403C

Undertake research activities

Learner guide

Version 1

Training and Education Support
Industry Skills Unit
Meadowbank



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Section 1 Research issues

Elements and performance criteria:

1. Prepare a research plan

- 1.1 Ensure views and interests of *stakeholders* are reflected in the research methodology and it is compatible with ethical considerations
- 1.2 Select research methodology suitable to needs, purposes and resources and to maximise credibility of outcomes
- 1.3 Select and use research strategies appropriate to subject matter being researched, the outcomes sought and the resources available
- 1.4 Ensure research plan incorporates strategies for validating research outcomes

2. Implement appropriate research strategies

- 2.1 Determine and allocate resources needed to conduct research
- 2.2 Ensure collection, recording and storage of all relevant information is timely and will ensure validity, confidentiality and security
- 2.3 Identify a representative range of people and groups with an interest in the issues and consult them in appropriate ways to ensure validity of outcomes
- 2.4 Undertake consultation according to agreed practices and protocol of own and other agencies
- 2.5 Consider cultural sensitivities and ethical issues in all consultation

Research issues

Most community service workers, whether they work in services for the aged, in education and care, youth work, housing or other areas, will have to do some form of basic research at times during their work life. It may be research that underpins a funding proposal, evaluates your current service and programs, or provides an argument for providing a new service. You may be gathering information and ideas so you can improve on what you already do. Undertaking research can be as simple as determining the education and care hour needs of parents or gathering client views on the services you offer. Or it may be as large as a major piece of social research on the family support needs of a new housing estate. The basic process and ethics are still the same.

Your research must be credible, reliable and valid if you expect people to pay attention and make changes based on your findings. You need to get the research process right so that any recommendations you make are going to make a difference for the better. Your reporting needs to be clear and accessible. No-one would want to recommend an intervention, programme or service based on sloppy research and find out people are getting hurt or money is wasted in the process! For example, what would happen in the following scenario?

Melanie would like to open an education and care centre in a particular area, but isn't quite sure whether or not the suburb can sustain another one, since there are already four centres in the immediate area. She decides to research this by finding out how many children are on the waiting lists of the existing centres. The first one has 77 children on the waiting list, the second has 65, the third has 82 and the fourth has 74. With the total number of 298 children on waiting lists, she decides that this definitely indicates a need in the area, and goes about getting a bank loan and setting the wheels in motion to build a huge state of the art centre.

Can you see what Melanie may have done wrong? Possibly the biggest problem here is the lack of detail in her research, not to mention the lack of theorising as to the possibilities for her results. Since all of the centres have similar numbers, it is highly likely that many of the children are on the waiting list of all four centres. Many of the children may have also already been accepted into other centres (since parents rarely ring to cancel a waiting list position unless there's a hefty refundable deposit involved!). Likewise Melanie hasn't broken down the numbers into age groups. She may spend a fortune on opening a centre for three to five year old children, when the majority of the children on the waiting lists are actually babies! I'm sure you can think of many more reasons why this research was doomed from the beginning. Of course this is a hypothetical scenario, since centres aren't going to give out their waiting list numbers to just anyone over the phone!

In this section we will have a look at some of the main issues that come up when we are carrying out research with people. We will explore the role of research in community services. And we will consider a number of questions such as:

- What is research?
- Why 'do' research in community services?
- Who are the stakeholders and participants in a research project?
- How can we design research to suit the research participants and get the best information?
- What are some of the ethical considerations when researching?
- What is the role of research in the planning cycle of a service?

What is research?

When you looked at the name of this unit and realised you'd be studying 'research', you probably already had an idea of the meaning of the word 'research'.

Let's have a look at some definitions of research we found from a number of sources:

"Trying to find out facts or information."

Ivanovic, A and Collin P H, 1988, 1997, *Dictionary of Human Resources and Personnel Management*, Peter Collin Publishing.

"A seeking of knowledge, data, or the truth about something."

Roget's II: The New Thesaurus, Third Edition by the Editors of the American Heritage® Dictionary, 1995, Houghton Mifflin Company.

"Detailed and careful investigation into some subject or area of study with the aim of discovering and applying new facts or information."

Chambers 21st Century Dictionary, 2001, Chambers Harrap Publishers Limited.

Or consider this one:

"Wilson Mizner said it best: 'If you steal from one author it's plagiarism; if you steal from many it's research'" (quoted by John Burke in *Rogue's Progress*, 1975).

Dictionary of Euphemisms and Other Doubletalk, 1995, Hugh Rawson.

Do any of these definitions influence or change your view of research?

Research, simply put, is collecting information and thinking systematically about it (Connell in Wadsworth, 1997). We all carry out research in our everyday lives whenever we need to find out something, whether it's to buy the cheapest fruit and vegetables, to find a car or to cook a meal our guests will enjoy.

Research is a process which begins with a genuine question that needs answering, a systematic process for gathering answers, then imaginatively generating explanations about why these answers were found (Wadsworth, 1997).



You probably already do research all the time in your everyday life. In fact I'm sure you would have researched this course and the various alternatives before commencing!

Activity 1.1



Task

What if I asked you right now which second hand car I should buy for under \$5,000? Which one would you recommend? Some of you would give me more useful answers than others, depending on how recently you had been in the car market, how interested you are in cars and how much money you usually have to spend on transport.

But if I asked you to put yourself in the following shoes, your response and approach might be different:

You have \$5,000 to buy a second hand car. You have just landed a new job - the one you have been working towards for years. You need your own private car however, as you need to visit a range of services for this job. This car must be reliable as you will sometimes be travelling along lonely country roads at odd hours. You also need to know that this car will last you at least 5 years, as you will not have this amount to spend again in that timeframe.

The outcome of your research is really critical. Finding the right car will mean you can do the job you have wanted so much, your personal safety is assured and your finances will not be thrown into chaos. Jot down some ideas you have for thoroughly researching this purchase:

Go to *Answers and feedback to activities* for feedback for this activity

Carefully planned research is more likely to lead to useful and effective results. Research is also best when it is led by a genuine question or a genuine desire to find something out. In the example in Activity 1.1, the information gathered had the potential to make a big difference to your life.

Sometimes research involves seeking out information by asking questions and reading, as you often do when deciding on a large purchase. At other times research is done by trying things out and carefully observing changes, as you might when gardening or doing home repairs, honing your skills over time and with experience.

Why undertake research?

The most basic answer to this question is that we undertake research because we want to *'find out about something'*. But the difference between curiosity and research is that when we research we are interested in gathering evidence to establish some objectivity. We need to start our research by asking ourselves:

*Why do I want to know about this matter?
What use will this information be?*

As Wadsworth (1997) states *"an active consciously inquiring mind is the first ingredient of research"*. We usually research because we want to learn more about a situation in order to make improvements or solve problems.

What do you really want to know?

This leads us to the first rule of useful and effective research: *"Work out what you genuinely want to find out, and what you genuinely don't know."* (Wadsworth 1997)

A genuine question is one where we do not already know the answer. This may seem obvious, but many people launch into research to try and prove what they already know or believe. If we approach research in an open way, putting aside our own preconceptions and judgements, we are likely to learn much more from the results.

When researching we need to be very clear about *who* the research is for and *what* the research is for.

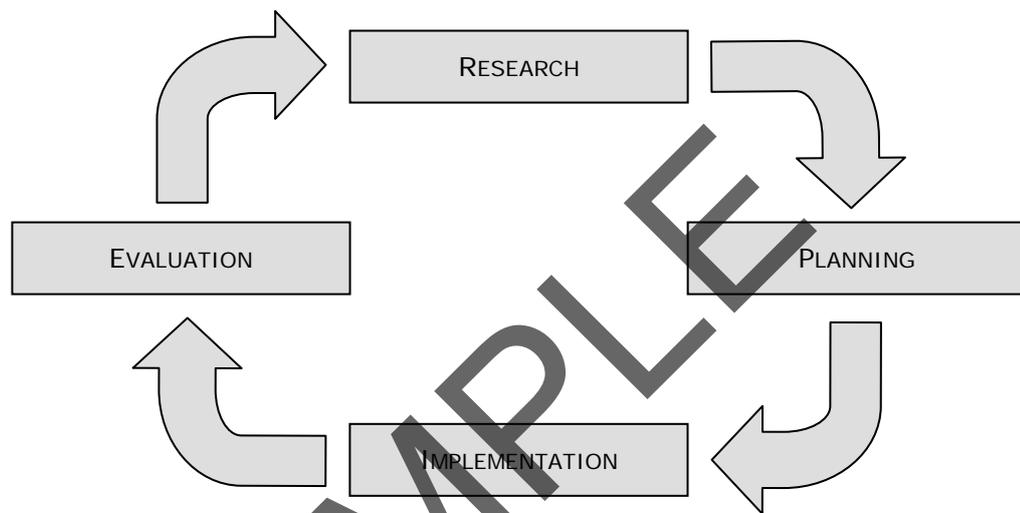
The planning cycle

Research is an important part of the planning cycle in community services. Research provides the evidence to plan and implement programs, activities, projects and services to individuals and the community. It helps us to find out how satisfied our clients are, whether we are meeting their needs and how we can incorporate their views into our planning. It gives us an opportunity to reflect on our work and on changes we make. Research helps to ensure that our

interventions are based on some objectivity and real need rather than our own perceptions about others.

Research not only helps us to plan and implement, but helps us evaluate our programmes and services. By researching our own service we can assess the usefulness or otherwise of the programs, activities, projects and services we provide.

It helps to think of this process as a cycle:



As you can see in this cycle, research is an ongoing process.

Participants in research

The target group

Research is often aimed at finding out something for a particular target group. So, what is a target group?

A target group is a group of people that you define by some common characteristic/s for the purpose of your research. The defining characteristic might be where they live, or their culture, or sexuality, or age, or interests. For example some target groups you could research might include:

- People with a disability.
- Single fathers of young children.
- Families from an Arabic speaking background in a particular suburb.