# In Defence of Research Units

**Author's note** (21 May 2010)

In 1976, when SSRC closed the Survey Unit (and all staff were made redundant) I obtained a post as Principal Lecturer in Sociology at the then Polytechnic of North London (now part of London Metropolitan University. Specifically I was to be Head of the Social Research option of a new, yet to be designed, 4-year BA Applied Social Studies degree (the other option was in Social Work). This was the very first undergraduate degree in Social Research in the UK and would also qualify students for the Diploma of the Market Research Society. The course was approved in March 1977 and first intake of students was in September.

In view of the research team and programmes I had built up, the Survey Research Unit was set up in the Faculty of Social Studies in 1978 with myself as Unit Director. The Unit attracted more external research funding than the rest of the faculty put together and, when promised funding for additional teaching staff never materialised, provided crucial research methods teaching input to the Social Research option of the new degree. Changes to senior management structures at the Polytechnic in the mid-1980s resulted in problems for research units as control of research was centralised and autonomy severely curtailed.

In a highly political move, instigated by a malevolent and misguided cadre within senior management, a Director's Working Group on the Survey Research Unit was set up, which reported in March 1988: this report has now mysteriously "disappeared". No other research unit was subjected to such a process.

This is my response to that report. It outlines the development of applied social research at PNL (including setting up the first undergraduate degree in social research in the UK) and details my approach to training in (quantitative, empirical) social research and to providing career structures for social researchers, all then woefully inadequate in the UK.

It also illustrates the problems of setting up, resourcing and maintaining research centres in academic institutions, and goes some way to explaining my eventual decision to take early retirement in 1992.

The final paragraph gives some idea of the flavour.

*"Over the past three or four years I have seen dedicated and committed people gradually lose heart all around me and simply cease to make any special effort over and above their contracted hours: I have now joined them and have genuine doubts about whether I seriously want to stay at PNL or even in research for that matter. This report does nothing to dispel these feelings. In the current climate and with current management structures and personnel, I cannot see any serious prospect of improvement."*

From: John Hall
To: Jane Hopkinson
Date: 16 March 1988

**Director's Working Group on the Survey Research Unit**

Thankyou for your memorandum of 7 March and copy of the final draft of the report. I note that the report is "agreed" by the Working Group, but I may wish to make my own submission to the Director in more detail and covering more ground at a later stage.

In general I agree with the main thrust of the report insofar as it relates to PNL structures and procedures, implying managerial anarchy over a long period. Whilst I appreciate the positive comments on my own contribution, I think the report skirts the issue of SRU and carefully avoids making any specific recommendations about SRU whilst strongly hinting that PNL still needs to get its act together as regards research units and centres, especially those involving external funding and/or the public image of PNL.

**Historical and personal background**

Although SRU represents a considerable personal investment on my part, it was never my intention to be an empire builder or an emperor: that some colleagues in PNL so chose to interpret my aims, coupled with their antipathy to "empiricism and positivism" and accusing me of "methodological determinism" is symptomatic of a deep malaise. When I was made redundant by SSRC on the closure of its Survey Unit, I had been for a long time been heavily involved as a staff side negotiator for the AUT in trying to establish proper conditions of service and salaries for research workers in SSRC Units, and in attempting to create career structures and enabling procedures. The conditions and salaries negotiated and agreed by SSRC (on condition that we withdrew our reference of the case for the Survey Unit to ACAS) stand to this day and were also used by Natfhe when national conditions were initiated for research staff in Polytechnics and Colleges.

I took the first job I was offered in the area of social research in the London area which fitted in with what I thought SSRC had been trying to achieve, and which appeared to offer an opportunity to teach research properly at undergraduate level. Undergraduate teaching in research methods had rightly been identified as pathetically inadequate in the UK and was seen to be at the root of SSRC's problems at post-graduate level. This job was at PNL and I took a large drop in salary to be appointed at the top of the PL scale.

At my interview for my current post at PNL, I was asked by the late Dr James Leicester how long I would stay if I got the job (Principal Lecturer and Head of the Social Research and Planning Option of the proposed new BA Applied Social Studies) I replied that provided I was able to develop research the way I knew it could and should be developed in Britain I would stay until my younger child had finished his education (ie at least seven years). Those seven years have passed and more, and I think I have demonstrated what can be done with determination, skill and good will.

It must be remembered that in 1976 no-one had really heard of PNL in social research terms and there was not much to hear of apart from a quite important and well-funded (by

MRC) series on deafness. I brought with me a reputation and a network of academic and commercial social science contacts (not to mention the Local Authority contacts arising from my Alderman membership of Haringey Council) that should have been the envy of any self-respecting institute of higher education (with a commitment to its local community) in the world. I laid the lot at the disposal of PNL. PNL was clearly not ready to absorb this, but over the years and with the considerable help of PNL staff now retired, moved or deceased, the makings of research were developed and the groundwork laid for much of the Department's current research.

At the Royal College of Advanced Technology in Salford, I had had experience of working in a research team which was dissipated because senior management were too busy getting themselves Professorships in the new University and a golden opportunity to establish an Urban Studies Centre around an established research team was squandered.

At SSRC my mentor in how senior management should behave towards young researchers was the late Prof Angus Campbell, Director for 25 years of the Survey Research Center at the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at Ann Arbor, Michigan. Prof Campbell spent a sabbatical with us whilst he was ISR Director and I tried to implement his standards at PNL. For the first few years after SRU was set up, and until he died, he invariably spent two or three days of his annual European holiday with SRU. His article in International Social Science Journal on the development of research centres is a classic with many lessons for PNL, most of them ignored or dismissed by senior management.

It was my contention when I came to PNL in 1976 that it was possible to develop a first rate research endeavour within a teaching institute. It was also my advice from Prof Campbell and others that no such endeavour would survive if it did not have at its head an Established member of the teaching staff. My own position was also that I had an established reputation and career, a safe job: I did not therefore need further to promote my own name through seizing credit for other people's work by joint (or even single) authorship as happens elsewhere. Indeed I have positively promoted the authorship of others even in cases where I have done most of the work myself, and I have never failed to acknowledge even the most minor contributions of effort. This has not always been reciprocated to me or to SRU.

The comments which follow should be read in the light of the above.

**Comments on the Review**

I supplied a great deal of material to the group as well as names of people they might contact. This was extremely time-consuming on my part, yet little of substance seems to have found its way into the report, nor does the group appear to have spoken or written to some key people, either in or outside PNL, from whom a more complete picture might have been obtained (eg Dr Mark Abrams, Jim Ring, Fred Coalter). Only one client was seen out of the literally hundreds who have passed through SRU. The report is therefore based on only partial evidence.

I should like to have seen some reference to the £850,000 in external funds raised by SRU since 1976 which is more than the rest of the Faculty put together. I should like to have seen some acknowledgment that SRU has been intimately linked with the development and continuation of the Research Option of the BA Applied Social Studies and indeed underpinned it by direct subsidies for several years when PNL stubbornly refused to resource it (in spite of assurances to CNAA that one lectureship a year would be provided as the degree intake progressed). I was told by the late Dr Brian Heraud that had it not been for my appointment CNAA would probably not have validated the Research Option of the BAASS. The report might also have mentioned SRU's pioneering role in developing the research base and the infrastructure for research in the Dept and the Faculty, and in recruiting research staff of sufficient calibre and commitment that they persevered with PNL to form the core research teaching staff, incidentally eliciting praise from CNAA and HMI reports.

Those staff who have remained in, or returned to, PNL have now developed their own units, and I should like to think that their experience in SRU was not entirely in vain although there has been a tendency in some quarters to play down or even conceal the role of SRU in creating the conditions and the programmes which enabled them to do this. Not least in this were the conditions of service and managerial protection I afforded my staff by removing from them the burdens of finance and administration and affording as far as financially possible some degree of continuity of employment and security. Many of these staff are still at PNL if no longer in SRU and represent a unique resource in British higher education, much valued by students, HMI and CNAA.

I made it clear when I met the group that SRU has never been resourced by PNL except in research posts obtained in competition through normal channels and that these and other PNL inputs (ie notional research relief for myself) have been more than made up in subsidies to PNL in the form of substantial amounts of free teaching (amounting in one year to 1.5 FTET's) and purchases of equipment and furnishing.

I am concerned at the separation of SRU and myself at various points and the biased picture which emerges implying that other SRU staff had no input to advisory and training work. Had the panel seen everyone I suggested, they would have been disabused of this misconception. Another point of concern is the separation of survey research from other methods. I have never advocated this and indeed did not originally want a Survey Research Unit, but a Centre for Applied Social Research.

The report also seems to query whether a unit is needed at all rather than individual

experts who can be consulted as colleagues. This is totally to miss the point of units and centres as identifiable groups for research staff to belong to and to which external clients can relate. Otherwise there would be little point in establishing all the other research and study centres which have sprung up in recent years.

The report states that no formal report on SRU has been made to faculty "notwithstanding requests therefor". This is not true as no such request has ever been made. SRU has always reported to HoD/ASS and/or to PNL or Faculty Research Committees and through whichever system has been in force for preparation of PNL Research Reviews. In at least two instances reports were in fact made simultaneously to PNL Research Committee and to Faculty Board; later reports were on projects rather than SRU as a whole.

The original bid was for a Centre for Applied Social Research. "Survey Research Unit" was a compromise to satisfy PNL and Faculty politics and scepticism. SRU was closely modelled on the SSRC Survey Unit which closed in 1976 amidst public and international outcry. PNL obtained great benefit and credibility at home and abroad when SRU was established at a time when survey research was under threat, as a discipline and an activity, from various ill-informed, but powerful interests. Indeed, SSRC later set up its own Survey Methods Centre to meet some of these counter pressures, and SRU maintains regular contact with its staff and output.

Among previous SSRC staff who came to be associated with PNL were myself, Jim Ring, (statistical computing) Dr Mark Abrams (External Examiner to the BA Applied Social Studies Research Option and later Hon Fellow of PNL) Dr Alan Marsh (Principal Social Survey Officer at OPCS, evening course lecturer and now Director of Research at the Economic and Social Research Council) John Utting (evening course lecturer and then Deputy Director of the National Children's Bureau, now retired). Colin Brown (Policy Studies Institute) has had students on placement. The British Council has arranged two visits and one three month placement in SRU on the strength of our work in Social Indicators and Quality of Life. Distinguished visitors from overseas have included, in addition to Prof Campbell, Prof Bernard Blishen, Director of the Inst of Social and Behavioural Research, York University, Ontario; Prof James Davis, Director of the National Opinion Research Center, Chicago; Prof Rudolf Andorka, Director of the Inst of Sociology, University of Economics, Budapest; the late Prof Louis Guttman, Hebrew Univ of Jerusalem; Prof Walter Ruegg, Inst fur Sociologie, Universitat Bern.

SRU was established by Faculty Board after long negotiations about scope and terms of reference and it was made quite clear by the then Director, Dr T G Miller, that no special resources were to be made available. At my request an Advisory Committee was agreed and established by Faculty. It met, I think, twice under Jean Snelling. Requests by me for further meetings around the time of ARC/POL were ignored. I had agreement to extend it by adding outside members (Mark Abrams, Louis Moss, Martin Bulmer) for the SSRC/DRC application, but by this time SRU was taken over by other events and developments.

On the strength of MRC funding a Readership in Deafness had been mooted, but the substantial external funding of SRU ensured that one was awarded to the Dept, which I applied for, but did not get. This created problems for SRU. The Reader took responsibility for developing research further in the Dept, but took on some of my teaching

load so that I could carry on chasing money. Soon afterwards SRU won a tender for the massive DHSS Residential Homes project which took up virtually the entire workforce and resources and attention. Although other projects continued or new ones arrived, they were dwarfed by DHSS.

Later, following negotiations unknown to me and ultimately presented as a "fait accompli", CESSA was established as a separate enterprise out of SRU by staff who still worked (or had recently worked) for SRU, even though the DHSS project was £18,000 overspent (£11,000 net after NCC commissioned a report based on the work). This deficit should, in my opinion, have been written off by PNL as PNL did not negotiate as much further funding as it might. It was in fact debited to SRU and it took three years to recover the money in the form of surpluses on other projects. Thus CESSA was able to develop with a clean start, whilst SRU was saddled with a large debit and effectively crippled. In my opinion this should not have been allowed to happen, and had that £11,000 been available to SRU, subsequent history might have been very different.

SRU was also caught up in the early rounds of cuts when the "vacancy factor" was used disproportionately and unfairly on research posts which became vacant. Specifically these were:

> The departure of Dr S Harding to a Lectureship at Nene College leaving 8 months of a PNL/RF unreplaced: major funding application to SSRC for Quality of Life research shelved.
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> the departure of Fred Coalter to TRRU in Edinburgh leaving 14 months of a PNL/RF unreplaced: major survey of employers of research and information personnel in the public sector to provide information on trends in expectations for planning our degree syllabuses shelved.
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> the departure of Jim Ring to PNLCS leaving 4 months of PNL/RF unreplaced: a potentially high income earning "Teach- Yourself-Statistics" package for mainframe and micro- computers shelved.

In an attempt to maintain a credible and viable programme of work, and in response to a GLC advertisement for grants related to improving the Quality of Life in London, SRU switched its attention to the community sector, in which it had an extensive record. A bid was prepared for the GLC, which was well received, but somehow could not be fitted into the terms of reference of any of the awarding committees.

Not to be outdone after a great deal of work, SRU, on the strength of its long list of community research support, bid for and got a PNL/RA to conduct research into the research and information needs of community groups in four London Boroughs, a post which eventually went to Libby Cooper. At the end of the first year, SRU bid for the post to be upgraded to RF and for a Community Research Advisory Centre (CRAC) to be established **within** SRU. At the Faculty Research Committee the Director of Research and Consultancy had the audacity to question my personal role and that of SRU in this new proposal.

Later, at a meeting attended by the Dean and the then HoD, Randal Metzger, my role was again challenged (Libby Cooper was my RA and had drafted the SRU Research Reports document at my suggestion, using my records and under my direct supervision, and I was her Director of Studies for MPhil/PhD registered with CNAA) and to my utter amazement and astonishment, and in spite of my protests, CRAC was set up independently of SRU and my name was erased from something I had spent my entire career at PNL working towards.

Needless to say, the manner in which these new centres were set up, legitimate and welcome though they were, has led to inevitable strains and tensions which have been allowed to spill over into current relationships and decision making processes. This is both unnecessary and unfortunate and could have been avoided with more effective senior management and clearer rules.

These two factors, the loss of staff without replacement, and the setting up of two independent centres, go some way towards accounting for the drop in income over the last four years. Another factor has been my own reluctance to continue working unpaid and unrecognised overtime for PNL with little to show for it, even as surplus funds for SRU. Especially important in this respect are the two annual surveys for course monitoring and the changeover in computers and software for which little or no resources were made available.

One of the Camden researchers, Jan Kimber, will be working for CRAC in March. Again, one of my staff has clearly been approached ("poached"?) although she is a specialist in the research topic. There really ought to be some kind of protocol for making approaches to staff in other sections, even for courtesy. This is not so serious as it does not directly threaten SRU, but the inclusion in CRAC's terms of reference of advice and assistance in questionnaire surveys does tend to undermine SRU, and may well have been a deliberate attempt to supplant it, which Faculty has been unable or unwilling to counter. CRAC does a useful job, but its expertise in survey research is somewhat limited, especially in the computing area.

I do not like references to me rather than SRU. They can all be deleted without altering the sense of the report. It is the Unit which gives advice and assistance and always has been. I have merely been the first point of contact and still am, even if I am sometimes the only point.

I do not run short courses: SRU does as part of the Dept of ASS. In the past all surplus fees for these courses have been retained by SRU as I have never been allowed to count my short course evening teaching as part of my timetable. Nor have I been paid for this teaching, but I have been allowed to use it to pay for staffing and equipment. In 1987-88 this teaching has for the first time been so counted and the surplus fees are now retained by ASS.

It is not the presence of teaching staff, but of practicing research staff which benefits teaching. Only David Phillips is on a teaching contract, and that only for the last two years on one year contracts.

These developments might include a reference to the Readership (another post which ASS

lost when Christine Farrell left) to the viability of the BAASS Research Option, to the extensive collection of research reports and methodological material represented by SRU. Also the SRU was the only source of teaching and support in computing and statistics for several years. To some extent it still is for teaching purposes.

SRU money raising activities differ from those of other Units (eg MARU) as the others are mainly single source or single topic. SRU has had money from so many different sources and in so many formats and for so many things that PNL procedures have been sorely stretched to accommodate them, though PNL is presumably grateful for the money and prestige. (At one point Dr Miller seriously suggested that SRU did less research!)

SRU has always faithfully adhered to known practices and procedures and to Financial Standing Orders. Indeed, SRU's knowledge of these, sometimes learned the hard way, has frequently been of great assistance to colleagues venturing into research and/or external funding for the first time. Some element of devolution of accounting etc to Faculty would alleviate these problems.

It must be made absolutely clear that CESSA came directly out of SRU and the DHSS contract, as did CRAC out of SRU's community support work. I'm not quite sure what "at lower cost" means, but in fact CRAC costs more than SRU as PNL pays for it whereas it never paid for SRU. If it means lower cost for clients than going to the private sector, this may or may not be true as quality and speed may need to be taken into account.

Accountability for SRU is and always has been via HoD/ASS as for other Units. Whether this has always worked is another matter, but SRU has always assiduously reported or informed HoD of all its activities and finances. The converse has not always been true, especially with regard to finance, but even with the best will in the world PNL structures and procedures are not always appropriate to activities like SRU. I have never been given any financial information by finance except when I have had to ask for it. Occasionally my HoD has produced some on request or in desperation.

I was always given to understand that all finance was the reponsibility of the Finance Officer and that this was why 2% of all our direct costs were deducted. The transaction summaries supplied are in any case inadequate as they do not identify some of the costs and a great deal of time and effort is then needed to rectify anomalies, find errors or even to verify income and expenditure.

I think the report is wrong to query formal units. To have worked in SRU or any other unit is extremely beneficial when seeking jobs and is usually beneficial during the time in the Unit, particularly in providing identity and cohesion in a marginal profession. If this has not come across to the group, then internal politics and tensions should be cited, which in turn are entirely due to lack of interest in research (by PNL, then, as now) and lack of management and development structures which the group does refer to. The proliferation of units and centres is quite alarming, notwithstanding the timeliness and importance of their topics or the calibre of their staff, and PNL procedures and rules are frequently and flagrantly breached with apparent impunity.

It is not quite clear what is meant by management authority, [11 9ii)] but some people might

misinterpret this as management interference regardless. Authority by management is pointless without expertise and motivation on the part of the units as well as an element of (accountable) autonomy. Baseline funding [11 (iv)] is an interesting concept, but none has ever come SRU's way. PNL has never addressed the problem of funding new units at the expense, in the case of SRU, of the older ones, however well the older ones are doing. Some continuity is needed, and would have been provided if my original suggestion of a Centre for Applied Social Research had been taken seriously in 1977.

Too much personal politics has been allowed into the shaping of research and research management at PNL, largely through failures over a long period of senior management at PNL and Faculty level. This report may help to create more effective infrastructures for the support and development of research, whatever happens to SRU.

It should be clear from these comments that SRU represents a considerable personal investment of my time and energy over the years, and that I have not sought personal gain or advancement, but to implement an idea and to demonstrate what is possible. The long argument I prepared as a preliminary statement for the 1977 CNAA proposal for the Social Research and Planning Option has been fully vindicated, though at the time it was greeted within PNL by scepticism and downright hostility. The achievements of teaching in the area of research and of the research programmes themselves in this faculty are due in no small measure to SRU and in turn to me.

The development and maintenance of SRU also represents a considerable personal cost, not only financially in lost consultancy fees ( which I could have easily done instead), but also in lost career opportunities in the commercial sector or in a university (I was approached once to take on the then SSRC Survey Archive and several years later did not apply partly for family and schooling commitments, but mainly to give PNL one last chance). My life's work is tied up in SRU and PNL and I had hopes for my future too. Now I really do not know what to expect or what PNL expects of me or of SRU.

Over the past three or four years I have seen dedicated and committed people gradually lose heart all around me and simply cease to make any special effort over and above their contracted hours: I have now joined them and have genuine doubts about whether I seriously want to stay at PNL or even in research for that matter. This report does nothing to dispel these feelings. In the current climate and with current management structures and personnel, I cannot see any serious prospect of improvement.