

HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR: A RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP
 Libby Cooper, Community Research Advisory Centre (CRAC),
 Polytechnic of North London

Last year I reported the results of a survey I conducted which identified the origins, conduct and outcome of community research in North London. This was followed by a conference held at PNL which invited local voluntary groups to share their research experiences and to participate in training workshops in research methods. The outcome of assessing the research needs of our local voluntary sector led to the establishment of THE COMMUNITY RESEARCH ADVISORY CENTRE (CRAC) at PNL in September of 1986. The main objectives of the newly established Centre were fourfold: firstly to offer free advice at all stages of the research process for community and voluntary organisations in North London; secondly to offer computer analysis for questionnaires; thirdly, to provide training in research methods; and fourthly, to make available the resources of the Polytechnic generally.

Thus, the Polytechnic was once again able to put into practice one of its main policy objectives, namely, to serve the wider community by making its resources and expertise more accessible to them. It is, of course, particularly relevant for the Social Science Department to respond to demands from the local voluntary sector in its area since they have the mutual aim of improving the levels of social, economic and political competence in the local community. There is obviously a reciprocity in this relationship in so far as it has the additional advantage of making local people aware of the fact that Higher Educational Institutions are prepared to offer them more open access. In this way they may come to recognise the relevance of higher education and eventually gain the confidence to participate more actively in suitable short courses and even embark upon full time academic careers. At the same time, academics within the Institution can gain a greater understanding of the needs of their local community and then respond to their demands by providing more appropriate courses.

My own research ascertained that the main preoccupation of voluntary groups is to tackle conditions of social deprivation by improving service delivery, encouraging self-help and community participation. It also revealed that one of the main strategies available to them in this endeavour is the use of research. Generally, their research falls under three main headings: (i) community needs assessment and consumer satisfaction, (ii) evaluation of the services that they provide, and (iii) use of research in campaigning around specific issues in their attempt to play an active role in the planning and policy making of both Local Authorities and Central Government departments.

CRAC has now been operating for one year and the types of studies dealt with have exactly reflected those first identified in my research. I have now worked with a considerable number of groups ranging from Law Centres, Housing Organisations, Health Centres to Community Centres helping them to initiate, develop and complete studies and then to disseminate their findings. Issues which they have examined include homelessness, drugs, communications, education, community needs assessment, health and racism,

Another important function of the Centre is to assist groups in forging links between themselves so that they can share and benefit from each other's knowledge and experience. And, I am at present creating a computerised data bank containing details of research conducted at the community level in the four Boroughs of Camden, Hackney, Haringey and Islington which will facilitate this process still further.

The main emphasis of my work is to transfer skills to community workers so that they are able to both conduct their own research studies and reap the optimal gain from their efforts. At all times it is stressed that the project belongs to the groups themselves and that my principal function is to instill confidence in order that they may develop their own strategies for change. Groups are, however, encouraged to consult with CRAC at the planning stages of their projects. This allows them to gain a clearer understanding of issues they wish to investigate as well as to question their reasons for conducting the research. Discussions at this point also concern the resources available within their organisation which will enable them to fulfill their own appointed tasks. Suggestions are made about the methods of data collection, sampling, problems of accessing and involving local people in the project, content and layout of questionnaires, interviews and group discussions, etc. Workers are always encouraged to approach other local groups who have conducted similar research so that they may learn from their experiences and acquire realistic expectations of the time and effort involved.

Following data collection by the workers themselves, CRAC is able to assist with analysis, either in terms of discussing appropriate methods for analysing qualitative data or the computerisation of surveys. But one of the central issues that has been emerging throughout the year is that, although community workers have a wealth of knowledge about, for example, the subjective experiences of their local community concerning issues of social deprivation, they feel that this knowledge has to be transformed by positivistic methods into objective facts and figures in order to give it credence: the obvious danger in this approach is that, if not handled carefully, the outcome of their research effort might well consist of nothing more than sterile boxes.

Three examples of this dilemma spring to mind. Firstly, a local Law Centre which used good campaigning techniques to interest their local community in answering a questionnaire on the subject of heating problems on their housing estate felt inadequate when it came to making sense of the quantitative data generated and to disseminating it in an interesting fashion. Secondly, a housing association catering for black tenants looking at homelessness and blacks were so concerned to quantify the issue that they were in danger of losing sense of the social and psychological implications of being homeless. And, thirdly, a mixed race group who were so intent on quantifying the numbers of people in similar situations in two large Boroughs that they decided to conduct a house to house survey. In each of the cases my main priority was to persuade individuals to have confidence in, and accept the value of, their own knowledge of the issues and, in a sense, to present them with an academic seal of approval. In the first case, the group was encouraged to (i) embed their data in their own experiences and knowledge of local tenants' complaints; (ii) consult doctors on the Estate in order to investigate the possibility of links

between poor housing and health problems; (iii) use a Polytechnic graphic designer to produce a more 'lively' document; and, (iv) draw upon our computer resources to illustrate the data in graphic form. In the second case, the committee was persuaded that a qualitative in-depth interview was just as capable of 'quantifying' the issue and, in the third case, it was demonstrated that their task was unresearchable with the low resources available to them (and that they were also likely to have their noses punched in on the doorstep!) They were, in fact, encouraged to use the resources of their group (100 in number) and to employ the group discussion technique to ascertain the problems experienced by people of mixed race in a white society.

Since groups do not always have the necessary resources to complete large statistical studies, they are always recommended to refer to existing literature and reports providing statistical data to add support to their case. I have, for instance, often referred groups to material produced by the Rad Stats health group. Since homelessness seems at present to be the most important issue investigated by the majority of people who have come to me for advice I would also appreciate any 'powerful' statistics which members might be able to refer me to.

CRAC has not, as yet, advertised itself widely, for to do so would, in the absence of external funding to pay for more salaried staff, lead to the potentially embarrassing situation of the demand for the Centre's services exceeding its possibility to respond. The resulting frustration could have obvious serious negative consequences for the Centre in the future. In the New Year I hope to offer short courses in community research which will be devised so that those who attend will be able to enter the course with a research question such as: 'How do I find out what our local community want from us?' or, 'How do we evaluate ourselves?' and leave with a research instrument which will help them carry out the task.

Overall, I feel there has been some reciprocity in this relationship between Higher Education and the Voluntary Sector. After finding out what groups need in terms of daily assistance, FNL was able to respond with a Research Centre and now through the experience of working with them we are able to respond again with relevant short courses. At the same time, it is evident that groups are extremely grateful for the assistance they have received. Not only are they able to acquire research skills which help them to conduct local studies but they claim that those skills are employed in other areas of community development. A second benefit which I notice occurring is that in conducting any piece of research, individuals are forced to look more clearly at their organisation as well as the world outside them, the result of which is that some kind of evaluation of themselves takes place.