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agus Gnóthaí Óige**
Department of Children
and Youth Affairs

January 2019

The Need For Research

Evidence into Policy Guidance Note #1

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Purpose of REU Evidence into Policy Guidance Notes

The Evidence into Policy Guidance Notes are a series of guidance notes introduced through the Research and Evaluation Unit's Evidence into Policy Programme (EiPP), a dedicated resource to support and work with DCYA policy units in driving the research-to-policy cycle. These guidance notes provide advice and information on key stages of the research to policy process, in support of evidence-informed policy making.

This guidance note sets out the need for research: 1) why it is important; 2) what it is; 3) how to implement formal research.

Key Messages

- Formal research allows you to examine and test assumptions of what you think the policy 'problem' is.
- Formal research generates new knowledge and insights that may confirm or change your understanding of the policy 'problem'.
- Formal research can help to avoid or correct errors; anticipate unintended consequences; and potentially reduce economic and social costs; in policy formulation and implementation, which might arise from a misunderstanding of the policy 'problem'.
- Formal research can help to validate what is working, why and for whom; and perhaps even more importantly, what is not working.
- Formal research can provide useful findings to inform possible solutions to an identified policy 'problem'.
- A necessary strategic approach for implementing formal research is the construction of an appropriate research design. This should be supported by additional elements (to inform specifications/requirements) where research is conducted by external researchers.
- An appropriate research design (and any additional elements) helps to ensure the research is 'fit for purpose' such that it should produce useful, reliable and valid findings that meet your policy needs.

1. Why is research important?

As humans, we are constructed to seek patterns in our everyday environment and tend to use 'shortcuts' that enable us to make judgements and decisions quickly, based on our own past learning and experiences. This is known as heuristics:

A heuristic is a mental shortcut that allows people to solve problems and make judgments quickly and efficiently. These rule-of-thumb strategies shorten decision-making time and allow people to function without constantly stopping to think about their next course of action. Heuristics are helpful in many situations, but they can also lead to [cognitive biases](#).¹

Cognitive bias is '...a systematic error in thinking that affects the decisions and judgments that people make'². In other words, what we *think* we know can in fact be flawed knowledge. Therefore using shortcuts (which generally work well) can be problematic when trying to critically examine, and evidentially decide, options and choices for policy change. Together with time pressures and the often overriding imperative to 'do something', it can be challenging to take time to reflect on whether there is a problem to be solved in the first place; whether our understanding of the issues/ problem is correct; or especially to discover if there are issues/problems that we don't know about, even before it comes to deciding on ways forward. So in designing an intervention, reform or initiative, there is a risk of missing something important; or of implementing a solution based on a misunderstanding of what the issues are. This in turn can generate unforeseen effects and unintended consequences, creating new issues to be addressed and potentially generating economic and social costs.

Formal research offers a way of interrogating and examining these assumptions and ideas, to then generate evidence-informed options and choices for policy change³. That is, formal research provides a set of tools to think in a very structured and systematic way. It generates and examines questions regarding a particular (in this

¹ Cherry, K. (May 2018), 'What is a heuristic and how does it work', <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-a-heuristic-2795235> accessed 22nd August 2018.

² Cherry, K. (June 2018) 'How Cognitive Biases Influence How You Think and Act', <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-a-cognitive-bias-2794963> accessed 22nd August 2018.

³ See, for example, Walliman, N. (2011) *Research Methods: the basics*. Routledge: London; Sarantakos, S. (2013) *The Palgrave Macmillan Social Research*. Fourth edition. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York;

case, policy-related) issue or concern so that at the end of the process there are new insights and knowledge, as well as some ideas for possible solutions, to inform your policy needs. By answering research questions through a formal research process, you should have much clearer, robust and reliable information to support and validate your ideas or assumptions about the policy concern, and often, how and why this is the case. Or perhaps even more valuably, the research findings may show that these ideas and assumptions were not valid, and there is now information on what to do differently, or a new way of defining what the problem actually is.

2. What is research?

In the broadest sense, research is any activity that asks basic questions to find out information you need (or you think you need); and tests assumptions about what you think you know. What distinguishes formal research activities is the application of a systematic, deliberative design that

1. Constructs hypotheses and/or theories based on your ideas of what you think a research or policy 'problem' is;
2. Generates aims (the purpose of the research) and objectives (what you want to find out), then research questions, to test your ideas (theories/hypotheses). This establishes how, why and in what way the research is conducted.
3. Identifies the most appropriate data and methods to answer these research questions.
4. Implements some form of data collection or data analysis strategy (e.g. statistical modelling).
5. Analyses the data.
6. Generates findings that should meet the aims/objectives of the research by
 - Answering the research questions and thus providing evidence-informed policy design principles and programme elements; and/or
 - Providing reliable and useful information from which it is possible to assess implications, options and choices for policy changes; and/or
 - Demonstrating 'what works', why and for whom; or what doesn't work; and/or
 - Uncovering unexpected, surprising or counter-intuitive results (that may generate a need for further research into re-framed questions); and/or
 - Identifying new issues or 'problems' that you didn't know about (that may generate a need for further research based on new questions) and/or;
 - Demonstrating a need to consider other/different policy options (that may generate a need for further research on 'better' policy options).

7. Draws conclusions (including policy implications in the case of policy-relevant research), based on those findings – the ‘so what, now’.

This is the step that begins the translation of research findings into evidence for assessing implications, options and choices for policy change.

Sometimes, however, findings don't meet your aims/objectives. They don't tell you much, or are hard to interpret. There are many reasons why this might happen: because of a poorly specified research design; limitations in methods, data, or models; unexpected issues within the research team; and/or due to project management issues. A strategic approach to implementing formal research helps to mitigate these issues.

3. Implementing formal research: The need for a research design

What is a research design?

A systematic, deliberative design gives formal research its conceptual and methodological rigour. This *research design* is a strategy to help ensure that the implementation of any formal research activity is fit for purpose⁴, that is, it generates findings that meet your aims/objectives. Developing a research design is the first step for implementing formal research, whether this is to undertake your own formal research activities; or to inform specifications and requirements for a Request for Tenders (RFT)/call for research proposals. Taking time to construct a good – but also appropriate – research design gives you an opportunity to think through strategic needs for implementing the ‘right’ type of research and the ‘right’ methods based on aims, objectives and research questions. So that it should produce useful, reliable and valid findings and conclusions for your policy needs.

What is a research proposal?

In the strictest sense, a research design can be considered as an internal document or strategy to guide the conduct of the research by anyone undertaking formal research activities. More often, you will be commissioning research or otherwise

⁴ See, for example: Creswell, J.W. (2009) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Sage: London; Blaikie, N. (2010) *Designing Social Research: The logic of anticipation*. Second edition. Polity Press: Cambridge.

seeking research proposals for funded research. A *research proposal* is an external document. It is '...a public document... [that] addresses different audiences from a research design. While it includes many of the components in the associated research design, some of these may be presented in a different form' and/or will include additional elements (Blaikie, 2010, pp. 12 -13)⁵. A research proposal therefore sets out specifications and requirements (based both on the research design; and on additional elements) that help ensure that research conducted by external researchers is fit for purpose.

How do I decide what I need in my research design and/or research proposal?

Thinking about the nature of your policy 'problem' and the queries you have is a good way to determine what is needed in your research design. Your policy 'problem' might need formal research activities that quickly but systematically follows the steps in Section 2 to pull together existing research, information and data to address policy queries. Here, your research design will be relatively simple; it may be just a way of thinking rather than something set out in a document. Alternatively, your policy 'problem' might be complex and you determine you have to procure externally delivered research through a Request for Tenders (RFT). For this, you will need a much longer development phase to construct a research design; then to identify the additional elements needed, which together with the research design, should deliver research findings that meet your policy needs; that in turn will inform specifications and requirements for the RFT.

Can my research design and/or research proposal change?

Research designs can also evolve and/or be iterative. For example, an initial research design might implement research activities to review existing literature, data and/or research. Sometimes this will answer your policy queries and you will need no further research. Or it might help you decide requirements for essential unmet research needs to be further specified in the next iteration of your research design. It is also possible to build in some flexibility in research proposals. For

⁵ Blaikie, N. (2010) *Designing Social Research: The logic of anticipation*. Second edition. Polity Press: Cambridge.

example, you can specify essential and optional phases of the research, which will allow preliminary findings to inform the next phase.

What are my choices for research designs and/or research proposals?

Research designs and any additional requirements in a research proposal are context-dependent. Your choices for an appropriate research design may depend, for example, on what data is available to interrogate your policy 'problem'. Along with conceptual, methodological, procedural and related considerations, the final choice of an appropriate design (and any additional requirements in a research proposal) may also have to find a balance between costs, quality and time; wider constraints; as well as ethical implications; to determine the 'best possible' implementation approach.

Would you like more information?

Contact the REU team on dcyaresearch@dcya.gov.ie.