

ESTABLISHING A RESEARCH AND EVALUATION AGENDA FOR SOUTH AUSTRALIANS WITH A DISABILITY AND THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN SPORT, THE ARTS AND OTHER RECREATIONAL CHOICES; PHASE ONE.

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ABSTRACT

ABS (1999) research suggests a continuing under-representation of people with a disability in away-from-home leisure choices including sport, the arts and other recreation activities. Since the 1980s, South Australia along with other States and Territories of Australia, has initiated major restructuring of public service provision, including the involvement of people with a disability in new policy and management frameworks. For all of these changes however, there remains significant gaps in the information and evidence needed for quality decision making when supporting opportunities for people with a disability. This is particularly evident in leisure choices away-from-home. This information or evidence gap applies to many funding bodies and service providers working with the nineteen percent of the Australians with a disability (ABS 1999). Through an innovative and unique collaborative project involving five major service and funding bodies, applied research is being conducted to identify these knowledge-gaps in South Australia. The aim is to place these knowledge-gaps in an order of priority for possible closure via future research and evaluation efforts. This paper presents the methodology of phase one of the project, an initial assessment of the methodology used, and some of the implications for its use in similar projects in the future.

Key Words – people with a disability, service providers, focus group, methodology, qualitative

1. INTRODUCTION

The low participation rates of Australians with a disability in away-from-home sport, arts and other recreational choices is well documented (ABS 1999; Crilley; et al. 1999; Darcy 1999; Dempsey, et al. 1992; Dempsey & Simmons 1995; Holmes 1999; Lockwood & Lockwood 1999, 1996 & 1993; Schleien & Ray 1988). This lower participation rate may well be the result of participants and service providers not having enough of the right information. The Commonwealth report 'Shaping up' (Commonwealth of Australia 2000) argues the need for a number of changes in how organisations approach recreation service provision and assessment to improve desired outcomes. One of the major issues identified by the report is the poor quality of information on which various industry sectors invest time and resources. The report also acknowledged that, '...more detailed studies should be undertaken to explore further the potential of using sport and recreation as a tool in achieving social objectives' (Commonwealth of Australia 2000, p.48). An indication that the South Australian State Government has recognised a need for quality information and communication is the launch of their 'Promoting Independence' document (Department of Human Services [DHS] 2000). This document looks at informing government policy through the adoption of disability action plans throughout all government departments. One of the five key outcome areas is directed at agencies ensuring information about their services and programs are inclusive of people with a disability.

1.1 Purpose and scope of the project

Five key South Australian organisations representing service providers in recreation and sport, the arts, health promotion and disability services, came together in 2000 to form a unique research consortium. These organisations included: Arts SA; the Disability Services Office (DSO); Health Promotion SA; Office of Recreation & Sport (SA); and the SPARC Disability Foundation Inc. The primary objective of the collaboration is to develop a research and evaluation agenda for South Australians with a disability and their involvement in sport, the arts and other recreational choices. The intent of establishing an agenda is to assist service providers in these areas to better inform decision making and Government policy on funding allocation and service provision. The research consortium commissioned the Centre for Environmental and Recreation Management (CERM) at the University of South Australia, to conduct the project in a collaborative, applied research mode.

By identifying and developing an agenda, the project seeks to highlight possible information gaps which could be closed through the application of research and evaluation efforts. As a result of this undertaking, priorities for future research and evaluation projects to respond to these information needs, will be identified. The agenda may provide the opportunity for individual organisations or other industry collaborators to target current information gaps, take ownership of some of the priorities, and act on these identified research or evaluation areas. In establishing an agenda, the process may also answer underlying questions of what information is currently available and what information is currently used by service providers.

2. THE RESEARCH PROCESS (METHODOLOGY): PHASE ONE

Phase one of establishing the agenda consisted of three stages. The first stage involved an information search and review of relevant research reports, papers and evaluations completed in recent years, with particular reference to studies relating to people with a disability in South Australia. Stage two consisted of five focus groups with individuals representing recreation, sport, arts or disability organisations in South Australia, who provide services to people with a disability (refer section 2.2). A sixth focus group was conducted specifically with people with a disability, advocates and educators (refer section 2.2). The third stage consisted of two separate draft questionnaires being developed from stages one and two. These questionnaires were refined by having them reviewed by key collaborators and a number of selected sport, arts, recreation, disability service providers, people with a disability and advocates. The result of this process was two questionnaires; one questionnaire is for sport, arts, recreation and disability service providers. The second is specifically for South Australians with a disability, or parents and carers.

2.1 Why use focus groups?

Since the late 1900's, focus groups have been very effective as market research tools and have been used extensively in evaluating qualitative aspects of products or services (eg. the taste of a new soft drink to consumers). As a result they have been useful in providing information which might not have otherwise been found through other methods (Thornton & Faisandier 1998). Focus groups are quite different from a group interview or a series of interviews, in that they are an entity in their own right, with the discussions raised having the ability to vary considerably from one focus group to the next. This feature involves unique dynamics and interactions between specific groups (Macdougall & Fudge 2001).

Fontana & Frey (1994) summed up the advantages of the focus group style of qualitative methodology as being relatively inexpensive and flexible, stimulating participants to respond to the questions, while providing a rich base of data to examine on completion. As Asbury (1995) and Murphy, et al. (1992) assert (cited in Macdougall & Fudge 2001), the group interaction of the focus group process can often deliver more and richer information than individual interviews with the same participants. Moreover, as Thornton and Faisandier (1998) explain, qualitative focus groups seek a saturation of information about a particular sample, which may then be transferred to understand and possibly generalise about another or larger group. This factor makes focus groups particularly attractive and useful, enabling a diverse response from a larger group in a relatively short time-frame. However, focus groups do need effective organisation and adequate timing to properly prepare, contact and follow-up (MacDougall & Fudge 2001).

Involving and recruiting people for focus groups from existing and established groups or networks can be a useful mechanism in generating interest and creating a healthy awareness of a research project. This in turn may make it easier to maintain contact with groups involved in the research process, thereby making replication of the project and actioning of any outcomes far simpler (Macdougall & Fudge 2001). This level of involvement can also reduce many of the costs associated with the research, with collaborators providing in-kind support in the provision of suitable venues to host focus groups sessions and also refreshments for participants. Information derived from well conducted focus groups can often form the basis for other research methods, providing triangulation of data sources that emerge. In many

cases, valuable data collated from focus groups can be used to design questionnaires, as with this particular project; or more specific questions for use in face-to-face interviews.

2.2 Initial focus groups and results

Five 'story board' style focus groups were conducted in various South Australian locations, between November 2000 and February 2001, and are explained in this section. Five different organisations were approached to assist promoting and hosting these focus groups, including the Australian Council for Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER); Sport SA; Arts SA; Parks and Leisure Australia; as well as Barossa Enterprises (a member of Leisure Link). Focus group participants were largely identified and invited by these host groups from their industry contacts, memberships and associations, ensuring relevant representation from the industry. Further participants were accessed via the snowballing technique (Babbie 1995), whereby contacts provided through meetings, emails and referrals were asked to be involved, and then to recommend other persons and/or organisations to attend the focus groups. The number of participants targeted for each focus group session was between 8-16 people over the age of 15.

After university ethics approval was formalised and a protocol established, potential focus group participants were sent invitations and information outlining the research background and intent. This was done well in advance of the proposed sessions and after careful consideration, planning and liaison with relevant groups and individuals offering their knowledge and support. In the focus group session, participants were arranged with tables and chairs in an orderly horse-shoe shape facing a projection screen. Cardboard name plates and permanent texta pens were also placed at each seat and table around the room, enabling participants to write their names, and if appropriate, their organisation details. Ample numbers of thin cardboard cards were provided for participants to hand-write their responses to a series of questions, as they were raised. The background and intent of the research was reiterated to participants, with the research process, direction and facilitation of the focus group session also explained before proceeding. Two facilitators attended four of the five sessions, with one of those, or another person available, to collect and collate cards.

After confirming that participants understood the intent of the research and focus group, the researcher used an overhead projector to display and ask five questions (one at a time). At some of the sessions where people with visual impairments participated, responses were possible because a concise verbal account of the questions accompanied the display of overheads. In each of these instances, it was negotiated with participants to have access to a note-taker, either provided on request or from their own organisation. The note-taker took down responses to each of the questions on behalf of the participant with a visual impairment. This same strategy also applied to participants with physical disabilities which for some people, restricted their ability to write their responses on the cards provided.

The five questions asked of respondents in the context of sport, arts and other recreation services, included:

1. What information do you or your organisation currently collect or generate?
2. What information do you or your organisation currently use?
3. What types of research or evaluations (planned gathering and reporting of data) do you or your organisation conduct, and how often?
4. Who has access to the information you collect or generate?

5. What information would you like to have access to, to assist in delivering your service?

As each question was projected and read out, participants were asked to respond by writing one short statement or idea per pre-supplied card. Participants were also asked to write the number of the question they were answering at the top of each card, so that if they were inadvertently dropped, they could still be attributed to the specific question they answered. Beyond points of clarification, little or no discussion was held throughout the process. Individual cards were collected by the facilitators as they were being completed, who immediately placed them on a flat, vertical surface at the front of the group for all to see. The use of cards in this manner, effectively told a 'story' of participants responses, enabling the group to compare their thoughts with other participants, while also stimulating other thoughts and responses that they may not have otherwise considered. After a short while, the facilitator would read out some of the more pertinent or interesting responses and clarify their intent. This time also provided an opportunity for the facilitator and participants to query, question or clarify the written responses, and possibly add others. Once there was consensus on the clarity of written content, the cards were taken off the board and collated according to the question answered. This process was repeated for each question, taking between an hour, and an hour and a half to complete each session, depending on how many responses each group had to offer.

The result of the first five focus groups concluded that the major information generated and used from service providers came from various newsletters, legislation, databases, directories, checklists, registers, websites, word-of-mouth and feedback. Most service providers conceded that not enough regular research and evaluations were carried out by their organisation; but the most common appeared to be grant or acquittal evaluation reports to funding bodies, member/customer feedback, accessibility auditing, community consultations and needs analyses. Access to information ranged from the popular media, funding bodies, local, State and federal government departments, educational bodies, as well as peak industry organisations.

Some examples of the types of information that focus group participants indicated they would like to have access to included:

- Reasons why people don't access services despite a perceived need for it
- Barriers/benefits of inter-agency cooperation/collaboration
- Role of the arts within the broader context of sport and recreation
- Financial thresholds of people with a disability to better determine/provide opportunities
- How to filter down information from peak agencies to 'grass roots' organisations
- Socio-demographic information about people with a disability, and
- How people with a disability prefer to access/receive information/range of formats.

2.3 Sixth focus group and results

The sixth focus group was conducted at the Disability Information Resource Centre (DIRC) during May 2001. This was specifically arranged to ensure people with a disability, advocates and educators provided input into the first stage of the research. Participants for this focus group were identified, invited and informed using the same techniques employed in the initial focus groups (refer section 2.2) with 12 people attending. The process was conducted in the

same manner, with participants writing one idea per pre-supplied card, in response to the following three questions:

1. What information do you contribute (collect) for sport, arts or other recreation service providers?
2. Do you use or see the results of any information/research or evaluations collected by sport, arts or recreation service providers?, and
3. What information should sport, arts and other recreation service providers be using (collecting) to improve services for people with a disability?

Participants were then shown the four research priorities identified from the first five focus groups and asked to rank the importance of each on pre-supplied cards, using a ranking scale from 1-10 (1 being the lowest and 10 the highest). Participants were also asked to accompany this with a short statement to justify the ranking given. Responses were collated and shown to the group in a replication of the methodology described in section 2.2.

2.4 Limitations of focus group methods

Contriving ways of stimulating open discussion, especially where some issues may be controversial or where there are groups involved with different levels of power or status, is an age old problem for researchers (MacDougall & Baum 1997). Whilst the use of focus groups has to some extent been criticised because of the impacts of censoring and the potential of 'groupthink' the research project reported in this paper found great merit in using focus groups to extract informative data from participants. The concept of groupthink was derived initially from social psychologists and relates specifically to the process whereby members of a group may adjust their own thoughts or behaviours according to the thoughts or impressions of other focus group members (Carey & Smith 1994). Groupthink may be influenced to a greater degree were an obvious imbalance of power or status between focus group participants exists. (ie. the presence of a project funder may alter how a fund recipient responds to questions).

Whilst this particular research project found the use of focus groups advantageous, there are potential dilemmas to consider, particularly if focus groups are adopted as the exclusive research method. If for instance, only one group of stakeholders were invited, the focus group may not generate an exhaustive coverage of all the pertinent issues. This may also result in the sample not truly representing the group or issue being researched. Macdougall & Fudge (2001) highlighted some of the potential difficulties in recruiting for focus groups, including small numbers of participants showing up for the sessions, either through a lack of personalisation and follow-up of the invitations, or inappropriate planning (ie. not enough notice to prospective participants, not building on existing relationships, or a lack of established perceived relevance of the research). Focus groups, as a research method, also require a relatively dynamic presenter who can stimulate the ideas of participants, while teasing out the necessary information in a methodical manner. In this way, a criticism that may be levelled at this method is an over-reliance on the skill of the presenter in the collation and interpretation phases. There may also be a perceived lack of 'numeracy weighting' involved in focus group results which may deter the more quantitative researcher.

Macdougall & Fudge (2001) suggest that focus group research, in collaboration with consumer, community or advocacy groups affiliated with the desired participants, particularly where these may be sensitive, can maximise the success of research. 'Where research or evaluation grants may not always provide the necessary resources, researchers can develop partnerships with community agencies or seek supplementary resources' (Macdougall & Fudge 2001, p.125). This partnership approach was adopted by this particular research project with the collaboration of five major industry partners and other relevant stakeholders (refer section 2.2). These networks and hosts greatly assisted in attracting suitable prospective participants and provided venues to conduct the sessions.

3. OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSIONS

This project successfully used a focus group methodology to identify the major research and evaluation areas that sport, arts and other recreational service providers, as well as people with a disability using these services, may consider as priorities. Researchers contemplating the use of focus groups in any future research may benefit from adopting a similar method to the one proposed and used in this research project. The series of focus groups covered a range of representatives from the areas of sport, arts and other recreational choices. This included local government agencies and service providers in rural areas of South Australia and formed the basis for the development of two questionnaires. One of the questionnaires has been formulated for service providers, with the other designed for people with a disability using away-from-home services.

3.1 Identified priority areas for research and evaluation

Four major areas of research and evaluation were identified from a review of the focus group data. These broad areas provided a framework for the types of research and evaluation information needed to better understand and serve South Australians with a disability in their choices of sport, the arts or other recreational activities. The major areas appear to include:

1. What are the benefits of involvement in sport, the arts and recreation for people with a disability? (eg. individual health; social, etc.)
2. How could individuals and organisations understand South Australians with a disability better, to meet their needs? (eg. meeting legal requirements; best practice frameworks; interagency cooperation and success variables)
3. How do individuals and organisations access and secure sustainable resources for service provision and related activities? (eg. access to finances and effectiveness of its distribution), and
4. How effective are programs and services in delivering outcomes? (eg. location, levels of service).

The future results of the questionnaires distributed to service providers and service clients/customers will ultimately provide a more definitive assessment of the value of the focus group methodology, as reported in this paper.

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