Overcoming political and organisational barriers to international practitioner collaboration on national examination research

GUIDELINES FOR INSIDER RESEARCHERS WORKING IN EXAM BOARDS AND OTHER PUBLIC ORGANISATIONS

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Introduction

The guidelines that follow are intended to provide help to insider researchers working in exam boards and other public organisations concerned with high-stakes assessments, such as national school-leaving examinations or university entrance examinations. The guidelines were born out of the project *Setting and maintaining standards in national examinations*[1]. That project aims to examine critical policy positions and processes for assessment standards in a range of countries, drawing on analyses from in-country experts and researchers, and using senior personnel from exam boards as participant observers. The project board quickly identified barriers to this type of work, and concluded that guidelines for participants would be helpful. The guidelines form part of a wider project that aims to articulate and codify the political and organisational barriers to exam board insider research, and delineate a range of ways to overcome them.

The guidelines supplement existing literature on insider research by discussing how that literature fits into the particular context of exam board research. As such, the guidelines do not claim to represent new advice. Nor has there been any attempt to carry out a systematic literature review, or to comprehensively analyse project data in order to suggest a model or framework. The guidelines are simply a distillation of advice provided across a wide range of methodological literature. They have been written by an insider researcher for insider researchers, and represent a summary of ideas that I have found useful in my own professional and research practice. Although the guidelines borrow from 'how to' texts, they do not, in any way, purport to be directive. They are intended to be considered, used, and adapted – in whole or in part – as suits the particular researcher, context and project.

The guidelines are organised in three parts:

1 A **discussion paper** provides a brief summary of some relevant methodological literature. Insider researchers may find it useful to read and reflect on the issues raised. One or two key sections or issues may resonate. Project leaders might like to consider asking team members to read and discuss the ideas with colleagues.

2 The **guidelines** themselves make some specific suggestions on actions that may prove helpful in insider research situations. These are organised in sections that represent stages of insider research projects. Insider researchers may want to use one or more of the sections, as appropriate, to help specific, task-focused reflection on how to handle a particular project. You may or may not want to jot down your thoughts on suggested actions and proposed questions. If you do record some of your thoughts, these may provide you with useful starting points for drafting a project outline.

Both the discussion paper and the guidelines could form useful discussion material for research managers to use with staff to elucidate issues.

3 A **bibliography**. This is not intended to provide an exhaustive reference list, but instead to suggest the most useful reading on key issues.

[1] http://oucea.education.ox.ac.uk/research/recent-research-projects/standard-setting-and-maintaining-in-national-examinations-project/

PART

1

DISCUSSION PAPER

1 Background

These guidelines were born out of the project *Setting and maintaining standards in national examinations*. That project focuses upon comparison of curriculum-related assessment standards for school-leaving examinations and university entrance examinations. Its main source of evidence is participant observation; it uses participants who already work within the system under investigation – mainly senior personnel from exam boards[2].

Exam boards have a complex political task in managing public and stakeholder perceptions of examination standards. Practitioners within examination systems are not necessarily in a position to make the types of public critiques of the system that are necessary to allow methodological, theoretical and cultural debate about their work. Exam boards and their staff find themselves in highly political environments in which their organisations, and individuals who work for them, can be scapegoated for political failings (McCaig, 2003; Baird & Coxell, 2009). This can

produce a risk-averse setting that can discourage transparency and reflection. Indeed, some of the participants in the *Setting and maintaining standards in national examinations* project did have to spend considerable time convincing their key stakeholders to allow their participation in the project.

To overcome these issues, a sophisticated, mature and self-reflective approach is needed. Senior exam board personnel writing about their own organisation's systems face a number of problems: they come to their research with certain assumptions and knowledge that they must try to 'unknow'; they may find themselves directly or indirectly subject to the political pressures mentioned above; and they cannot leave the research field when their research is complete – they must continue an ongoing relationship with their research subjects. Some of these issues are treated in the methodological literature, but rarely, if ever, in the combination of circumstances that affect exam board insiders. These guidelines synthesise and expand on the existing literature.

2 Insider research: a risky business

The phrase 'insider researcher' is fast becoming common among qualitative social science researchers. The term's usage is becoming rich and complex, and can refer to a wide range of contrasting scenarios, including professional staff carrying out research as part of a further qualification for career-development purposes; staff whose day-to-day work includes responsibility for research among a range of more operational responsibilities; and staff whose job role is explicitly defined as that of 'researcher' (Sikes & Potts, 2008, pp. 3–4).

Across this spectrum of possibilities, exam board personnel researching their own organisation's policies, systems and practices may be thought of as 'participant observers'

[2] In some examination/qualification systems, responsibility for assessment and standard setting is shared across a number of organisations or resides in organisations that would not describe themselves as exam boards (such as government departments, independent regulators, or universities). For ease of reading, the phrase 'exam board' is used throughout these guidelines as a shorthand for the range of organisations that may be involved in responsibility for assessment, qualifications and standards.

– although not in the way the term is most commonly used in social science research.

Participant observers are traditionally envisaged as researchers who enter a community under study in order to study it; they are part of the community only for the purposes of the research project (see, for example, Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, pp. 404–408; Hammersley, Gomm, & Woods, 1994, pp. 63–65; Denscombe, 2010, pp. 206–215). This brings its own set of issues, which are extensively documented in the research literature (for example, Maxwell & Beattie, 2004; Robson, 2002, pp. 314–325). By contrast, exam board insider researchers are part of the organisation they are researching: before, during and after the research. While some are employed to provide research services for the organisations, some may not identify themselves as researchers on a day-to-day basis, and may instead think of themselves as practitioners who happen to be doing a piece of research: they are researching professionals rather than professional researchers (Wellington & Sikes, 2006, p. 725).

These guidelines are intended to help researching professionals entering the hitherto unknown environment of an insider research project. Insider researchers may research regularly, or only occasionally; in either case, they may feel they are in familiar territory in their research. For insiders, it may be especially easy to miss important considerations and to assume that everything will work the way you envisage it. Their research may go wrong simply because they have failed to anticipate and manage the risks. Smyth and Holian provide a dramatic metaphor for the insider research process:

If you have been abseiling you would know that feeling when you defy gravity, lean back into empty space parallel to the ground far below and step off down a cliff face. Researching from within can also be a little like abseiling, which is why we advise careful thought before starting out, going with others experienced in the process and having a main line and a safety line.

(Smyth & Holian, 2008, p. 42)

This description of insider research is dramatic, and perhaps seems alarmist. It conveys undertones of risk, a sense of dare-devil activity, and perhaps loss of control. However, it need convey none of these things. It describes a process that may very well *feel* dangerous, but where the risks and dangers can be controlled through careful planning and preparation, appropriate support mechanisms, and some practical techniques. When research projects go wrong, it may be because the researcher has not anticipated the risk: the sheer drop may not be visible until you get to the top.

The first step, then, may be to reflect on the risks and how to mitigate them.

One of the most important things to consider is whether there might be a difference between your colleagues' perceptions of your research and your own perceptions of your work. If there is anything unique about insider research, it is that your research questions will concern activities with which you are closely connected, and your research subjects will be people

with whom you have an ongoing relationship. Whether or not you set out to take a critical stance, your insider research is likely to be seen as a challenge to the status quo, at least by some colleagues. The risks that you are taking are risks of 'exposing previously undiscussable issues, disturbing arrangements that serve particular people or purposes, confronting others with less than welcome observations regarding organisational practice and surfacing and naming dilemmas' (Smyth & Holian, 2008, p. 39). If your research is designed for you by superiors, you may find its aims do not align with your personal work aims. If you are able to design your own research, your aims and your research aims may not align with organisational ones – or they may align with the aims of some individuals or groups in the organisation, but not others.

Equally risky is that your research may challenge your own position. Bruce Moore describes the processes he went through carrying out an insider research project when he was a senior executive of a large charitable organisation. Moore felt that his insider research caused him to dispute fundamental assumptions in the organisation, and transformed his own ways of conceiving of and describing the organisation's work. Moore compares this to the original sin of Adam and Eve: once he had eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge, there was no going back:

By giving in to the temptation to taste my own guiding assumptions and preferences I had forsaken the luxury of being able to see the world from an epistemologically privileged position. I found that the basis and foundations for my previous understanding and identity had been removed. I felt a profound sense of exhilaration and excitement at being conscious of thinking for myself and awareness that I had been conditioned to think in a particular way, but I also felt terribly isolated and vulnerable by the absence of absolutes or certainties to guide me in my views. I had not only exposed, I had also removed the chains of ideology and power that had previously permeated my thinking. Although I was left feeling liberated, I also realized I was naked.

(Moore, 2007, p. 34)

It is clear that Moore felt himself compelled to speak honestly about what his research had revealed to him. He felt he had no choice but to take ownership of his own discourse in order to achieve authenticity. This sense of authenticity through honesty is encompassed by what Michel Foucault calls 'parrhesia'. With its roots in ancient Greek philosophy and literature, the idea of parrhesia implies speaking truthfully for the sake of common good, even when that is not recognised by the majority, and at considerable personal risk:

The one who uses parrhesia, the parrhesiastes, is someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse. In parrhesia, the speaker is supposed to give a complete and exact account of what he has in mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks. The word "parrhesia" then, refers to a type of relationship between the speaker and what he says.

For in parrhesia, the speaker makes it manifestly clear and obvious that what he says is his own opinion.

(Foucault, 1983)

Although Moore describes his insider research process as a liberating one, he also tells us that having uncovered a gap in perception between himself and his organisation's board of trustees, he felt compelled to speak his truth, and thereafter felt that he not could stay in the organisation. The concept of 'speaking truth to power' (American Friends Service Committee, 1955) is key to the parrhesiastic role:

the commitment involved in parrhesia is linked to a certain social situation, to a difference of status between the speaker and his audience, to the fact that the parrhesiastes says something which is dangerous to himself and thus involves a risk, and so on.

(Foucault, 1983)

Moore's description of the results of his insider research accord exactly with Foucault's description of parrhesia: 'the parrhesiastes risks his privilege to speak freely when he discloses a truth which threatens the majority' (Foucault, 1983). Foucault did not associate parrhesia with insider research, but more recent methodological literature on insider research has done so, pointing to the importance of this aspect of the insider researcher's role: 'the obligation or duty to speak with the greatest courage and conviction we can muster when the time comes to speak honestly' (Kemmis, 2006, p. 461). It requires a certain bravery to be the parrhesiastes: to speak candidly and boldly. If this is what is required of insider researchers, then it is little wonder that it creates a vertiginous sense of leaning back into empty space.

3 Barriers to insider research in exam boards: the danger of oversharing

As I have noted, exam boards operate in highly political environments in which organisations and individuals can be scapegoated, especially when a policy debate hits the media or when examination issues are used as ammunition in political disputes. Arguably, the nature of the work managed by exam boards predisposes them to risk-averse attitudes, and while many may encourage reflection within the organisation, they may be less comfortable with transparency outside the organisation. This can make it difficult for exam board researchers to share the results of their research – a problem shared by many other insider researchers:

sharing data has the potential to bring latent conflict into the open where problem areas of practice become exposed which can give rise to 'finger pointing'. As an insider-researcher, you can agree to give those who

provide data their say on what is shared, but you need to recognize that this accedes to traditional structures and spheres of authority which are often in tension with more democratic notions of reflective practice and action research. As an insider-researcher, you will often find yourself having to resolve real dilemmas of what to divulge and having to balance organizational interests with those of the research itself, and indeed of your continued access to the workplace.

(Costley, Elliott, & Gibbs, 2010, chap. 9)

Much of the advice on how to plan and conduct insider research, and many of the checklists consulted in order to draw up these guidelines, stress issues around the need to protect the confidentiality of participants (for example, Bell, 2005, pp. 48–9; Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2006, pp. 158–161; British Psychological Society, 2014, p. 9). With particular reference to insider researchers, Costley et al. point out that 'There may be sensitivity about the topic, the confidentiality of the data and the anonymity of the organization and individual participants' (Costley et al., 2010, chap. 5). In effect, anonymity for the organisation, its products and processes, and sometimes its personnel, is almost impossible, and not just at the time of the research. As Floyd and Arthur point out with regards to HE insider researchers, 'Whatever efforts are made to preserve anonymity, a simple online search will allow the most novice investigator to identify the institution' (Floyd & Arthur, 2012, p. 177). They stress that confidentiality and ethical issues need to be considered as both internal and external issues – they are not just issues that occur when the research goes outside the organisation:

there is a complex interaction between a researcher's prior knowledge through being an insider and its effect on his or her research design and implementation and the subsequent knowledge gleaned through the research and its impact on his or her personal relationships and professional roles.

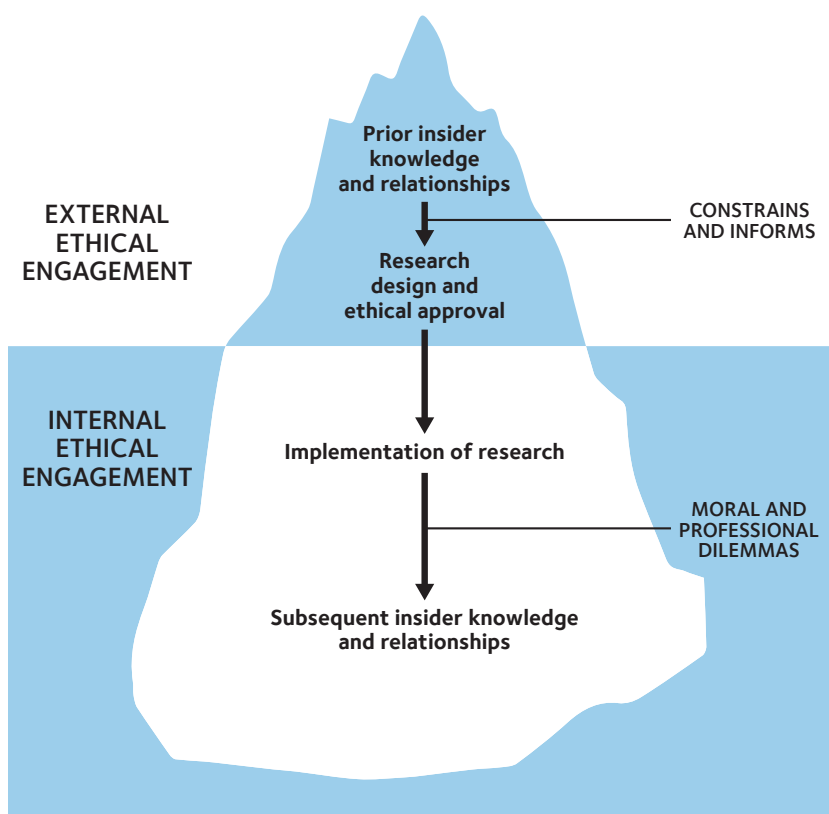(Floyd & Arthur, 2012, p. 178)

Floyd and Arthur sum up the ethical issues in a useful diagram (Figure 1), which they characterise as 'the ethical engagement iceberg'.

Below the surface lie the insider moral and professional dilemmas that the authors urge researchers to try to anticipate and to constantly monitor. These include issues such as gaining dangerous knowledge (as Moore did); the need to maintain ongoing professional relationships; and the difficulty of protecting the anonymity of respondents – inside and outside the organisation – not just as the research progresses, but in the long term after the research is complete (Floyd & Arthur, 2012, pp. 178–9).

We will return to the question of how to protect our research subjects in the final section of these guidelines. As an insider researcher, the question of how to protect your research subjects also becomes a question of how to protect yourself. As we noted above, in all of your research projects, you, your positions, assumptions and perhaps deeply held motivations, will be under study – directly or indirectly.

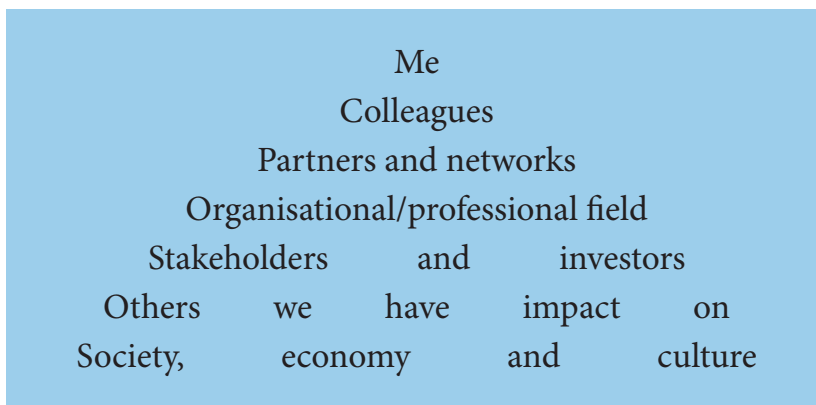Figure 1. External and internal ethical engagement

(adapted from Floyd & Arthur, 2012, p. 178)

Costley et al. summarise the influences and contexts impacting on work-based projects (see Figure 2).

This range of influences is a key issue for insider research. In any given situation, some of these may be perceived as positive, some negative. Almost certainly, some will be in conflict with others, and for any given project, some will be more important than others. But exam board research – especially when it is around central, important and sensitive issues such as assessment standards for national examinations that affect young people's life chances – often finds itself with *all* of these influences being brought to bear.

Figure 2 shows the researcher at the top of the triangle, which may imply that the researcher is the agent in all of this. As an exam board insider researcher, I would contend that in the politically sensitive world of national examinations and assessments, it can often feel that the exam board insider researcher has little or no agency, and that rather than mere influences, these things are pressures upon us. Our

Figure 2. The influences and contexts impacting on work-based projects

Me
Colleagues
Partners and networks
Organisational/professional field
Stakeholders   and   investors
Others   we   have   impact   on
Society,   economy   and   culture

(adapted from Costley et al., 2010, chap. 2)

Figure 3. The influences and contexts impacting on exam board insider research projects

Society,   the   media,   economy   and   culture
Students,   parents,   universities,   employers
Customers, policymakers, stakeholders
Organisational/professional field
Investors, partners, networks
Executives/boards
Colleagues
Me

(developed from the ideas of Costley et al., 2010)

work is situated in particularly sensitive, or even fraught, public and political space, where all of these stakeholders may have a view. That view is often strong, and often conflicts with the views of other stakeholders in the field.

Moreover, some of these stakeholders will not only have a view, they will also have influence or power over our work. Our organisations can almost never be anonymous – at least if we publish or share our research – and the findings of our research are not abstruse: they matter to the society we serve. Taking into account all the contextual pressures from policymakers, the media and society, I have suggested a more accurate depiction of the contextual pressures on exam board insider researchers (Figure 3).

These pressures will apply differently to different organisations, different researchers, and different research projects. The researcher will have to try to work out which of these pressures are likely to be most salient for a given project. This is not always easy for an individual

researcher, and points to the need for support mechanisms. With this range of influences and pressures upon us, the key question is how we can – with colleagues – create spaces in which our research activities will be fully supported, and our findings can be disseminated, discussed, and acted upon, through appropriate channels.

4 Objectivity vs positioning: what sort of research are we engaged in?

To articulate ways to tackle the possible barriers that might hinder our insider research, we must stop to reflect on what sort of research we think we are doing. In most (although not all) exam boards, there will be an understanding that 'research' of some sort is part of the business; this may be defined and resourced in different ways, but the researchers or the organisation will almost certainly feel a need to defend the objectivity and rigour of their work. As Elliot Eisner remarks:

Objectivity is one of the most cherished ideals of the educational research community. In fact, it is so important that if our work is accused of being subjective, its status as a source of knowledge sinks slowly into the horizon like a setting sun.
(Eisner, 1992, p. 9)

Exam boards operate in the educational assessment field, in which some schools of thought strongly defend the scientific nature of the assessment activity (often called 'measurement') and assessment research. It is not surprising, then, that exam boards have tended to align themselves with the scientifically based research movement; this movement, which can often be driven by government needs to present political decisions as evidence-based policy (Oancea, 2005; Hodkinson, 2004), promotes and supports positivistic views and allows research to be used in policy statements that use phrases such as 'demonstrates conclusively' (Sikes, 2006, p. 111). Critics argue that this 'politics of evidence' (Cheek, 2011, p. 252) allows policymakers to create illusions of objectivity and truth.

However, there exists a long debate about objectivity in social science research, summarised in numerous textbooks and guides (Hammersley, Gomm, & Woods, 1994, pp. 9–15; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, pp. 97–128). In 1992, for example, Eisner pointed out that views of research as objective simply fail to take into account the complexity of the task that we are engaged in. At each stage in each project, whether qualitative or quantitative, the researcher makes decisions about what he or she thinks will be plausible or convincing. The researcher's own history and position can never be eliminated; this background shapes the questions asked, the methodologies used to gather data, and the way the researcher interprets results.

Issues with objectivity are compounded when exam board researchers are researching their own organisation's practices, because insider research in any field is liable to criticism for perceived lack of objectivity. For good reasons, objectivity can be difficult, indeed impossible, to achieve for those researching their own employer's practices:

For the insider researcher who is also a 'proper' member of the setting they are investigating, the problem associated with criticisms around failure to maintain a distance in order to be able to take a clear and an unbiased non-partisan approach are significant and complicated. This is because adopting a distanced approach may, in some cases, be inimical to doing one's job in the way in which one has been hired to do it. People are expected to be loyal and committed to their employer and employing organisation and, whilst loyalty and commitment do not preclude taking an objective stance in order to develop and improve, detachment can be problematic in institutional terms.

(Sikes & Potts, 2008, p. 7)

In our insider research, rather than striving for elusive objectivity, it may be more helpful to conceptualise what we are doing with reference to a concept of situatedness. This concept draws on ideas first set out by Lev Vygotsky in *Thought and Language* (1934, revised 1986); Vygotsky put forward the view that all thought is structured through language. He argued, in setting out his theories of child development, that we cannot think except in relation to the situation we are in, and the situations we are in directly determine what and how we think and how we represent that in language: 'The connection between thought and word, however, is neither preformed nor constant. It emerges in the course of development, and itself evolves' (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 251). For researchers influenced by Vygotsky, thought (and research) becomes 'an encounter between individual choices and cultural tools employed in a particular institutional context' (Zembylas, 2003, p. 220). Our research cannot hide behind claims of scientific objectivity, but instead is situated in our own personal, organisational and political experience and contexts. Our task is to be self-reflective and to critically analyse our own and our organisational practices.

Researchers working in such situations strive to achieve this.

We have, though, established that within our own organisations, and as our organisations try to engage policymakers with the evidence we generate, the task of 'speaking truth to power' can be a risky one. How then can we make it less risky? How can we create conditions that foster the type of openness that creates spaces where our research activities can flourish?

5 Creating the right conditions for insider research: communicative spaces

Our key question is how we can create supportive conditions for insider research, where the findings can be safely shared, and where those findings are not valued less because of the closeness of the researcher to the source. I close this discussion paper with the suggestion that to be most effective, insider researchers should consider reconceptualising their research task.

Here, it is useful to turn to theorists of action research. Action research is essentially about initiating change, and we may not always feel that is the purpose of our insider research. Theorists of action research do have some useful lessons for all insider researchers, though, especially those theorists who emphasise the collaborative nature of action research. The most useful ideas draw on Jürgen Habermas's theories of communicative action and communicative spaces:

I shall speak of *communicative* action whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding. In communicative action participants are not primarily oriented to their own individual successes; they pursue their individual goals under the condition that they can harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions. In this respect the negotiation of definitions of the situation is an essential element of the interpretive accomplishments required for communicative action.

(Habermas, 1984, pp. 285–286)

Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon elucidate Habermas's theory in the context of their view of critical participatory action research, stressing agreement, mutual understanding and consensus as key components of a research process based on a theory of communicative action. They sum up communicative action as 'what happens when people interrupt what they are doing to ask "What is happening here?"' and describe the communicative space as 'a space where people will take their ideas, each other, and alternative courses of action seriously' (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014, pp. 34–36). The description of what this might look like in an organisation is attractive:

The commitment to communicative action involves a suspension of the strategic action we're ordinarily caught up in (getting things done), and an openness to re-thinking what we are and could be doing.

(Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 48)

Kemmis et al. focus on communication, negotiation and cooperation in their descriptions of how to organise action research in communicative spaces. Respect for others in the organisation is a key underlying principle, and putting this into action requires being explicit about your intentions, making commitments to colleagues and sticking to these, and keeping all affected parties informed (and involved) at all stages of the research project (Kemmis et al. 2014, pp. 172-175). These are important lessons for all insider researchers, and potential solutions to several of the problems that have been outlined in this discussion paper. The insider researcher can benefit from reconceptualising research as collaborative and communicative. Such ideas have played a major role in shaping the guidelines in the next section.

6 Conclusions

Insider research always needs careful consideration; this is particularly relevant for exam

board insider researchers. We may struggle with objectivity and authenticity. Within our own organisations, we may feel like neither insiders nor outsiders. We may be acutely conscious or blissfully unaware of the range of stakeholders who may exert pressure, creating conflicts of interest. Sharing the results of our research may be problematic both inside and outside our organisations.

However, these are not insurmountable problems. Insider researchers can and do find ways to address these issues in every research project undertaken. The following guidelines offer suggestions for ways to approach this work.

2

GUIDELINES FOR THE EXAM BOARD INSIDER RESEARCHER

Many guidance documents provide advice and checklists on how to carry out research projects, and many have useful things to say about aspects of qualitative research, action research, and insider research (for example, Denscombe, 2010; Bell, 2005; Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2006). In exam board research, we need to consider some key points from descriptions of several different research methods, and a distillation of those into one document may prove helpful. This section sets down some lessons and pointers that I have found useful in carrying out and reflecting on my own insider research. It has been compiled following a search of existing guideline documents – although given the size of the field, not one that claims to have involved comprehensive searching or systematic review.

The suggestions given have been tested through knowledge exchange with insider researchers, and their views were sought on how useful and practical they found previous drafts of these guidelines.

The advice below is not intended as a guide to research methods or ethics. It is assumed that it is addressed to researchers who already have established practices, and who wish to reflect on how better to create conditions to ask the question, 'What are we doing here?' Its focus is purely on how to open up spaces that facilitate openness and transparency, and allow the insider researcher to 'speak truth to power'. As such, it is intended to supplement existing knowledge and ways of working and does not cover all aspects of research design and planning, data gathering and analysis, and reporting.

The guidelines are arranged around the four stages of research suggested by Costley et al. (see below).

For each stage of the research process, some general guidance notes are provided. For the first three stages, these are followed by a text box containing a checklist of possible actions and/or key questions to ask. The checklists are adapted from existing guidelines and checklists on conducting research – mainly those on insider research (Zeni, 1998; Coghlan & Brannick,

The four stages of research suggested by Costley et al. (2010, chap. 5)

Getting in	Broadly: designing and planning your research and gaining agreement for it
Getting on	The research process itself: gathering your data and analysing it
Getting out	Closing and reporting on the research project
Getting back	Moving on from the research project to other areas of work

2010; Costley et al., 2010; British Psychological Society, 2014; Kemmis et al., 2014).

Getting in

The first task in any research project is to define the nature of the research. There is much advice on ways to go about this, but Coghlan and Brannick point out some particular problems for the insider researcher. For example, it may be tempting to think that senior colleagues may be 'won over' to the need for the research if they are presented with it as a way to solve a problem. Coghlan and Brannick advise against that approach: 'It may be that organisational members embrace problems with a sense of loss, wondering about the organisation's ability to reach a satisfactory resolution' (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010, p. 54). As already touched upon in the discussion paper, for exam board researchers working in organisations arguably already subject to risk avoidance and scapegoating, talk of 'problems' may not be the

best way to convince colleagues that your research will be helpful. On the other hand, they argue, framing your research in terms of opportunities may also be less than helpful, engendering excitement, encouraging divergent thinking and creating a risk-taking culture around the project. Better, they suggest, to frame the project in terms of 'issues', which they view as a neutral term (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010, p. 54). However, a glance at synonyms for 'issues' in any thesaurus might suggest the opposite, and perhaps the best advice is to think carefully about your language: 'topics' might be a more neutral term, or 'questions'.

Even if you are successful in framing your project in a neutral way, colleagues – including senior colleagues – may have a range of concerns about the work. Some of these may be purely practical: for example, concern might be expressed over the amount of time or resources that will be involved. In effect, they are giving you time to carry out this research and they want to be assured that the work will produce benefits for the organisation.

Most frameworks for insider research emphasise issues around consent to carry out the research. This guidance appears to make an implicit assumption that the researchers are working at other roles and need to make themselves known as researchers. Providing assurances of confidentiality for colleagues is seen as a key part of this process. Ethical frameworks almost always stress the need to avoid deception of research subjects, but if you are an insider researcher whose colleagues know that you are researching your own workplace's practices, then this becomes more complex. If research is, in fact, your day-to-day job, while in one way you are always open with colleagues, in another you are constantly in danger of practising deception: are your colleagues always aware of the particular work you are doing – its aims and purposes?

In the context of insider research, 'getting in' is less about negotiating access, consent and confidentiality, and more about some difficult upfront conversations about the possible short- and long-term

ramifications of carrying out and sharing the research. The British Psychological Society (BPS) *Code of Human Research Ethics* reminds us that scientific integrity requires clear aims: 'It is important that the aims of the research are as transparent as possible to ensure that it is clear what the research intends to achieve' (British Psychological Society, 2014, p. 10). Whether you are proposing the research topic, or someone else is proposing it to you, extended negotiations may be necessary to achieve this transparency. These negotiations should include overcoming concerns and highlighting benefits: in effect, you will have to sell your research to colleagues.

In the complex political world in which exam boards operate, public trust is both essential and fragile, and research always carries risk. Research within exam boards is likely to fall into one or more of the categories defined by the BPS as 'more than minimal risk', including research involving access to confidential information; research involving access to potentially sensitive data; and research that

may have an adverse impact on employment or social standing (for example, discussion of an employer, or discussion of commercially sensitive information). Importantly, too, for the exam board researcher, the BPS guidelines conclude that: 'Risk analysis should not only be confined to considering the interests of the primary participants, but should also consider the interests of any other stakeholders' (British Psychological Society, 2014, pp. 13-14).

When you are proposing or developing the research topic, risk assessments and negotiations around it are essential. For exam board researchers assigned a research project by superiors, it can be tempting to assume that such considerations do not apply – but senior personnel may not have research experience, and will not have time to think through a proposal in the same amount of detail as you do. If you do not want to find yourself in the frustrating position of having invested time and effort in a research project only to have senior colleagues ask for it to be stopped at a later stage, then you need to try to anticipate

as many of the risks and issues as possible, and discuss these upfront with key decision makers. The organisation's hierarchies and decision-making structures will be important here, and it will be useful to you if there are explicit and agreed responsibilities for signing off research proposals, research outputs and research dissemination strategies. It is important that you are absolutely clear about which individuals or groups have this responsibility and, if there are different individuals or groups involved, you should spend some time reflecting on how these might interact with each other.

Many social science codes of research practice emphasise causing no unnecessary harm, and this may be complex for the exam board insider researcher. We saw earlier that there are a range of stakeholders who may have an interest in your research; some of these may be directly impacted by it, and you may have to make difficult choices, balancing benefit and harm to different groups. Again, the key is to be explicit and to make sure that the relevant decision-

making individuals and groups are aware that outputs may benefit some colleagues or stakeholders but harm others. Don't forget, too, about senior stakeholders: while it may be difficult to imagine senior colleagues as vulnerable, in terms of publication of reports about aspects of organisational activity, it is senior staff who will bear responsibility and whose lives may be affected by your research. As an employee, you have a right to expect them to do you no harm, but as a researcher, you have an ethical duty of care to do them no harm.

Getting in

How to prepare the way to ensure the best chance of success for your insider research project

As well as your usual approaches to research design and planning, you should consider taking some or all of the following steps before your research begins.

Achieving buy-in

- Think carefully about how you will frame and describe your research. Consider talking about research topics or questions rather than problems, issues, or even opportunities.

- Establish credibility – just because you are part of an organisation and have support or high-level agreement for your project, you should not assume that everyone in the organisation will see the value of your project. Some research personnel work within an organisation, but slightly detached from it; at a personal level, making sure that your colleagues know you and your work can be really helpful when you need to discuss specific research projects with them.

- 'What's in it for me?' You may find it useful to ask senior colleagues and/or research participants to define what they would like to get out of the research.

- Describe the purpose of your research and its benefits for your colleagues and/or the organisation as clearly as possible: sell your research but do not overstate the benefits.

- Engage with colleagues to find out their concerns and discuss how these will be overcome.

- Consider using a risk analysis tool to document all of the possible risks and mitigating actions.

Ethical considerations

- Before beginning the work, you will have to take extra steps to make sure that colleagues (including colleagues more senior to you) are aware that the findings of the research cannot be guaranteed to be positive, or as expected.

- You will need to clarify for colleagues what use you will make of normally confidential information. Usually, what you will be doing here is reassuring colleagues that confidential information will not be made public. Making sure that colleagues know your research code of practice and have faith in how you implement it may be a longer-term task that is necessary to underpin trust in particular research projects.

- Work to be shared – even internally – will never be completely anonymous. You should take time to ensure that everyone involved or affected is aware of this. If you are planning to share your work outside the organisation, you also need to make sure that relevant senior staff are aware of possible ramifications for stakeholders or customers.

- Ask yourself what negative or embarrassing data you can anticipate emerging from this research. Might the organisation or individual colleagues be harmed (reputationally, professionally, financially)? Discuss the risks with these people and set out for them the precautions you will take to protect individuals, teams and/or the organisation.

Getting on

In the 'getting on' stage, you will be carrying out your research. Textbook after textbook on insider research stresses that it is here that the key strengths – and weaknesses – of insider research may occur.

You undoubtedly know more than an outsider would, but in order to be able to articulate and critically analyse that knowledge, you must, as Coghlan and Brannick advise, 'objectify your subjective experience'. You must find ways to sensitise yourself to

your environment, and create a 'strangeness' between yourself and your research subject (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010, p. 9).

At a practical level, you will need to plan where to begin, what data to gather and how to gather it.

Getting on (1)

Sources of data for the insider researcher

Data sources

You will need to decide what constitutes data in your project, and how to gather it.

Sources might include, for example:

Public sources
- Your organisation's public documents, perhaps those published on the organisation's website
- Media texts about your organisation and its work
- Public records (e.g. of parliamentary or judicial proceedings) that discuss your organisation's work
- Governmental policy papers
- Academic studies into the work of your organisation

Sources internal to your organisation
- Widely circulated internal documents, guidelines and manuals
- Limited circulation, 'confidential' internal papers and reports, including board and other committee papers
- Examples of data and paperwork involved in key tasks and activities

Data-gathering activities
- Observations of activities and meetings
- Interviews with your colleagues, perhaps at a variety of levels across the organisation
- Interviews with your organisation's customers and stakeholders (including those critical of the organisation)

Data analysis

- For the insider researcher, the issues are not around how to gain access to data, but how to treat the wealth of data available. You need to work out how to evaluate and weight your data sources, and how these can be represented credibly, while preserving the anonymity of colleagues, and protecting commercial and political sensitivities.

- You may feel that these issues are more problematic for qualitative than for quantitative data, but your organisation may have a wealth of quantitative data that feels like too rich a resource to ignore. When using that data, you will have to judge the extent to which your organisation's data can be taken as representative. You may also find yourself tempted to design your investigations to fit with the available data; this is practical, and entirely understandable, but in evaluating your findings you will have to take care to reflect on the limitations of that approach. In effect, you have to find ways to avoid becoming trapped inside your own data.

- As you collate, analyse and present your data, you need to take particular care to treat each data source appropriately, distinguishing between opinion and evidence-based positions. Your readers will come to their own conclusions about what constitutes solid evidence and what is commercial or political window dressing.

- You will inevitably gather more data than you need. Consider why you choose to report some data to a wider audience and why you choose to keep some for your colleagues or yourself. What are the political implications of the way you focus your story?

During this stage of the project, you may fall into the trap of assuming that because you have gained senior staff or committee approval for the work, you now need only get on and do it. As the BPS notes, 'consent should be an ongoing process and [that] a fuller appreciation of the research and the nature of participation will often become more apparent to participants during the course of their involvement with the research' (British Psychological Society, 2014, p. 21). It is your job as researcher to keep communicating and negotiating about your research methods and how your findings may be used: securing colleague (including senior colleague) support is not a one-off task, but an

Getting on (2)

Questions to consider while you are carrying out your research

You may find it helpful to consider the following questions while you are carrying out your research project. These are challenging questions, but the process of reflection, should, in itself, be helpful.

Objectivity and credibility

How will you create 'strangeness' between yourself and your research topic? How will you help yourself to see the topic with a fresh viewpoint?

- ☐ Will this study evaluate your own effectiveness or a method to which you are committed? If so, how will you protect yourself from the temptation to see what you hope to see?
- ☐ How will you examine and counteract your own pre-existing biases? Are there creative problem-solving or workshop techniques that you can use? Are there colleagues in other parts of the organisation who can help you with these?

One way to counteract your own biases is to include multiple viewpoints, and ensure that some of your findings come from observers who do not share your assumptions. How will you access multiple perspectives?

- ☐ What data will be contributed by others?
- ☐ How have you arranged with colleagues or other participants for recognition of their contribution?
- ☐ How are you negotiating authorship and ownership?

Power and hierarchies

How will you deal with issues arising from power relationships?

- ☐ What steps will you take to avoid coercing (or simply assuming cooperation from) colleagues more junior than yourself?
- ☐ How will you ensure that less powerful colleagues don't tell you what they think you want to hear?

- ☐ What steps will you take to withstand coercion from colleagues more senior than yourself?
- ☐ Remember that power imbalances, direct and indirect, may affect ethical dimensions of your study; you will need to plan how to deal with these.

Are you clear about who needs to give consent for your study?

- ☐ Who gives consent in the context of insider research?
- ☐ When and how is that consent obtained or assumed?
- ☐ Have you explained the implications to all colleagues who will take part in your study, or only the senior colleagues?

How safe do you feel in this institutional environment pursuing this research?

- ☐ Is there protection for your interpretations and critical analysis? Can you protect yourself from pressure to report favourably?

Who is responsible for and who is accountable for the final report?

- ☐ Will colleagues or committees review your report in draft?
- ☐ Are they, and you, both clear about the roles and responsibilities in this regard?
- ☐ Who gets final say on what goes in the report?

Who will read the final report or hear the findings?

- ☐ Will conflicts arise from your personal relationships with the research subjects?
- ☐ Is there potential for conflict to arise from the power relationships in the audience?
- ☐ What about an external audience?

ongoing process, which will require a significant investment of your time. It may be tempting to view this as wasted time, or as a progress-blocker, so it is important to remind yourself, too, that investing this time will reap benefits in terms of being more assured that your project will reach completion and be able to achieve impact.

To add value to the field, your research project will have to open up issues for critical enquiry and discussion; this may be perceived as challenging the value system of your organisation or professional field in some way. There may be personal and interpersonal challenges. You will need to consider your positioning as a researcher, as an exam board employee, and as a colleague, acquaintance or friend.

Getting out

As an insider researcher, you cannot get out of the research context in the same way that a participant observer could if the observer was only temporarily part of the organisation under study. Unless, like Bruce Moore, you are willing to resign your position, you are not going to get out physically, so to protect yourself and your

colleagues, all the involved parties need to be clear when data gathering is happening and when it is not happening. You need to agree a deadline for the closure of your data-collection processes, and you need to communicate that deadline to all affected colleagues.

You may wish to signal the end of the data gathering, and perhaps the end of your research project, with some sort of event or meeting in which you share your findings with colleagues. As well as marking a clear closure point, this also serves the useful purpose of debriefing the participants and other potentially affected colleagues.

The BPS *Code of Ethics and Conduct* (2009) includes standards for debriefing research participants, advising that psychologists should:

(i) Debrief research participants at the conclusion of their participation, in order to inform them of the outcomes and nature of the research, to identify any unforeseen harm, discomfort, or misconceptions, and in order to arrange for assistance as needed.

(ii) Take particular care when discussing outcomes with research participants,

as seemingly evaluative statements may carry unintended weight.
(British Psychological Society, 2009, p. 20)

Once your research is complete, colleagues who have participated in it or are affected by it should have an opportunity to hear about the research and to discuss the findings and conclusions. Staff at all levels of the organisation may read evaluative statements as criticisms of their work, and find this threatening. Even if you think these are phrased positively, they may imagine implications that involve job loss or changes to working practices that they find alarming. Don't assume that scientific conventions and language will come across as objective, either: to people not used to reading or hearing such language, it probably sounds cold at best and downright harsh at worst. Initiating change may not be the purpose of your project – that does not mean that colleagues will not see it that way, and react accordingly. You might need to protect yourself from the potential hostility, but more importantly, you need to protect your colleagues by being very careful about how you express your findings and conclusions.

Getting out

How to close your project successfully

It is at the close of your project that things are most likely to go wrong, but some simple steps can help to avoid many of these issues. These steps are all essentially about good communication with colleagues.

- Agree a deadline to stop collecting data, and stick to this. Make sure that colleagues know when you are no longer gathering data on the topic. You're not leaving the organisation, so they need to know when you are 'wearing a different hat'.

- Consider a meeting or series of meetings in which you share your findings and conclusions with colleagues, including research participants, senior staff, and anyone else in the organisation with an interest in – or potentially affected by – your research.

- Think about the outputs of your research and how to tailor these to different audiences and purposes. Don't assume busy colleagues will read (or understand and absorb) a research report written using academic conventions.

- Mind your language. You will be using at least two or three levels of specialised language (e.g. the language of research, the technical language of standard setting or assessment, the internal language of your organisation) and for any given audience, even within your own organisation, one or more of those may come across as jargon, or even seem completely nonsensical. Be especially wary of attaching specialised meanings to terms that may be in more general use.

- Be careful about the statements you make, particularly about evaluative language. Remember that you may know that no criticism is intended or change envisaged, but colleagues will not necessarily assume that to be the case, and may be alarmed by your findings and conclusions. You may find it helpful to ask a trusted non-research colleague to review your work and tell you how they think other colleagues will react.

- If you are writing a formal report, or presenting your findings in a formal presentation, don't assume that using scientific conventions and language will render your findings emotionally neutral. In fact, quite the opposite might be true. Readers not used to reading scientific language may not experience it as detached, impartial and fair; instead, they may experience it as judgemental, blunt and cutting.

- If you have feedback that colleagues may experience as negative or critical, it is especially important to think carefully about the form you present it in, the forum for presentation, and the language you use. In order to achieve maximum impact with minimum harm, you may have to think of your findings less as research and more as management feedback. The principles that apply in people management situations to handling negative evaluations constructively apply equally to research findings. Even better, if you have managed the research work collaboratively with affected colleagues, then sharing findings should be less about you giving feedback and more about the project partners discussing the findings.

Getting back

For an exam board practitioner who leads the occasional research project, then 'getting back' may seem a simple process of going back to the day job. For the exam board researcher, 'getting back' from any individual project means closing off that project and moving on to another research project. In both cases, the situation is not as simple as it may seem – we should remember Bruce Moore's warning:

By giving in to the temptation to taste my own guiding assumptions and preferences I had forsaken the luxury of being able to see the world from an epistemologically privileged position. I found that the basis and foundations for my previous understanding and identity had been removed.

(Moore, 2007, p. 34)

Researching your own organisation, whether in a one-off project or on an ongoing basis, can be a profoundly unsettling experience. You may question your own assumptions, or you may find yourself critical of some of your colleagues' guiding assumptions. Either way, it does not make for a comfortable working environment, and it will not necessarily be helpful when you start to plan your next research project.

To be most effective, insider researchers should consider reconceptualising their research task. The suggestions captured in these guidelines build on Habermas's theory of communicative action and sophisticated action research methodologies, and emphasise that at all stages of your insider research project, the more time you make for communication and negotiation with colleagues – and the more you see the process as collaboration – the greater your project's chances of success. If all of your interactions in setting up/selling and carrying out the project are cast as collaborative actions, and you reinforce or reiterate this wherever and whenever needed, you will counter any impressions that your project is somehow inspectorial or regulatory, or otherwise sitting in judgement on your colleagues' work. Planning, implementing and communicating about your work in this way will create an impression that your research is conversational and collaborative. While not all colleagues will want, or have time, to be active participants in your research, it may help you as an insider researcher to think of all of your research as participatory, and every piece of research as a joint venture with colleagues.

3

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