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# ***The complexity of collaboration***

## **Opportunities and challenges in contracted research**

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This article explores some of the issues faced by university academics undertaking contracted research for government and non-government organisations (NGOs) that is aimed at informing, improving or evaluating practice in the adult and community education (ACE) sector. The article begins with a brief contextual outline of the culture of research contracting that has developed between university academics and government and non-government agencies in Aotearoa New Zealand and more widely. It draws on three recent examples of contracted research undertaken by a small team of university-based researchers to analyse research relationships and the opportunities and dilemmas which present themselves in this type of research. We reflect on our experiences from these three projects to reveal the complexity of research collaborations, the potential for conflicting expectations and the need to manage these expectations through building trust. Finally, we discuss the problems and contradictions inherent in disseminating the outcomes of commissioned research and how these might be addressed.

### **ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND**

Adult and Community Education (ACE) in Aotearoa New Zealand, as elsewhere, has traditionally been under-resourced and undervalued by government. However, between 1999 and 2008 Aotearoa New Zealand witnessed a resurgence of policy interest in ACE. In 2000, shortly after the Labour Government's election to power, the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) commissioned a report entitled *Koia! Koia! Towards a learning society* (Adult Education and Community Learning Working Party 2001). The Tertiary Education Commission: Te Amorangi Matauranga is responsible for leading the government's relationship with the tertiary sector in Aotearoa New Zealand and for policy development and funding

of tertiary providers including universities, polytechnics, Wānanga, industrial training organisations, private training enterprises, and adult and community education. The report defined ACE and its role and outlined a vision for its future, describing ACE as:

*... A process whereby adults choose to engage in a range of educational activities within the community. The practice fosters individual and group learning which promotes empowerment, equity, active citizenship, critical and social awareness and sustainable development. In Aotearoa New Zealand, ACE is based upon the unique relationships reflected in the Treaty of Waitangi.*

ACE sector activity encompasses a range of formal and informal educational provisions and a diversity of provider organisations. These include secondary schools, iwi-based (Māori tribal) providers, small community-based groups, small and large regional and national voluntary organisations, rural education programs, tertiary education institutions and private training establishments.

According to the *Koia! Koia!* definition, ACE activity should take account of the bicultural nature of Aotearoa New Zealand, where the values, cultures and practices of the Māori (indigenous) and Pakeha (European settler) populations have equal standing. The Treaty of Waitangi is a crucial element of the relationship between Māori and Pakeha. Signed in 1840 by representatives of the British Government and a number of Māori tribal chiefs, it established British governorship in Aotearoa New Zealand, whilst recognising *inter alia* Māori rights to land and property ownership. It implies a partnership in which the cultural values, skills and world view of both peoples are respected and honoured – something which successive governments have failed to achieve in relation to Māori (Chile 2006; Munford & Walsh-Tapiata 2006; Network Waitangi 2008; Yates 1996). The Treaty also offers a guiding framework for the development of such a partnership, at the same time providing support to the voice of Māori to redress both historical and current inequalities and discrimination.

Alongside this resurgence of interest in ACE has been a desire on the part of the relevant government departments (in this case, the Tertiary Education Commission, which has responsibility for funding and monitoring the ACE sector) and some non-government organisations to fund research that can be used to inform or evaluate policy and practice in the ACE sector. Research contracting with university-based academics and private consultants has been commonplace in the social and community welfare field in Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere for a number of years (Biderman & Sharp 1972; Bridges 1998; Langan & Morton 2009; Slaughter & Leslie 1997; Whiston & Geiger 1992). Contracting university academics to do this type of work offers an implicit quality standard, based on a common-sense understanding that university research is underpinned by notions of rigour, ethics and independence (McKinley 2004; Whiston & Geiger 1992).

Correspondingly, university-based researchers in Aotearoa New Zealand, as elsewhere, seek opportunities to bid for research contracts with government and non-government agencies as a means of income generation and to offset funding shortfalls as traditional sources of government revenue decline (Bridges 1998; Slaughter & Leslie 1997). Applied research is also seen by many academics in the field of adult education as a way of creating and disseminating ‘really useful knowledge’ (Johnson 1979; Thompson 1997) about teaching and learning, and policy and practice in adult and community education, which can contribute towards creating social change and advancing social justice. Thus the issue for academics in this field of study is how to balance the demands and expectations of research commissioners with the interests of those working at the grassroots of adult and community education, along with the professional requirement to produce research that is valid, credible and ethically grounded, and widely available.

### **RESEARCHING FOR AND WITH THE ACE SECTOR**

The ACE Teaching Research Team at the University of Canterbury (UC) was formed in 2006. Its members are academics who are experienced adult educators and have also held active roles within the ACE sector. Over the past three years the team has built its national research profile through bidding for and undertaking funded research projects for the TEC and ACE sector non-government organisations.

Methodologically, the team’s approach to research has been influenced by two closely related conceptual positions: participatory action research (PAR) (Cardno 2003; Jason et al. 2004; McTaggart 1989; Reason & Bradbury 2001; Stringer 1996; Wadsworth 1998; Whyte 1991) and naturalistic inquiry (Erlandson et al. 1993; Lincoln & Guba 1985). Reason and Bradbury (2001, p. 1) refer to participatory action research as:

*... a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview.*

The team’s intention was to conduct research that was practice-based, action-orientated and democratic: practice-based in that it sought to investigate issues relevant to those working in the ACE sector (Stringer 1996); action-orientated through its concern with describing current practices, their strengths and also the constraints that needed to be overcome in order to create positive change; democratic in that it attempted to involve practitioners directly in raising issues that were relevant to them, in commenting on and critiquing the researchers’ analysis of these issues, and in disseminating the outcomes of these endeavours. The team’s objectives involved fostering relationships of collaboration, creating opportunities for collective reflection and sharing ideas and perspectives, as well as facilitating links in order to sustain the ideas and actions resulting from the research (Senge & Scharmer 2001).

Our understanding of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba 1985) assisted us to feel comfortable with the fact that our research designs would need to be flexible, that research in the ACE sector was undertaken in a changing policy environment, and that the research should be guided by participants' views of the issues requiring investigation. This approach was consistent with our intention to collect data from discussion and reflection alongside practitioners, to involve them in evaluation and analysis, and to negotiate the outcomes of the research with project participants.

However, whilst the literature offers general principles which may usefully guide research practice, the reality of collaboration and participation is more complex and more challenging. We explore some of these challenges here in the context of three funded research projects undertaken by the team between 2006 and 2008.

### **THREE RESEARCH PROJECTS**

#### **Project 1: ACE Regional Networks and Professional Development – Government Commissioned; Government Funded**

In 2006, the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) invited tenders to undertake research into the professional development needs of ACE practitioners. Part of the TEC's policy for the ACE sector was to encourage TEC-initiated Regional Networks of ACE practitioners to organise, coordinate and participate in professional development activities to enhance sector capability and capacity. Another part of its agenda was to strengthen the involvement of Māori organisations in ACE Networks, since the under-representation of Māori providers in local practitioner forums and their relative disadvantage in gaining government funding for ACE activity was an issue recognised as needing to be addressed.

The TEC set the overall parameters for the research: to explore and evaluate a range of approaches that ACE Networks could take to meet the professional development needs of the sector and to develop good practice guidelines for the sector based on the research findings. The research team's overall approach (as outlined above) was presented to the TEC in its written bid to undertake the research. The team was awarded the contract. The research contract, drawn up between the TEC and the research team, specified the team's approach to the research, the agreed timescale and reporting processes. It also contained a clause that asserted the TEC's ownership of the research data.

#### **Project 2: Evaluating Adult Learners' Week — NGO Commissioned; Government Funded**

In 2008, ACE Aotearoa, a non-government organisation that serves as the national umbrella organisation for the ACE sector, commissioned research into the impact and effectiveness of Adult Learners' Week (He Tangata Matauranga) and the extent to which the week's focus and activities contributed to the progress

of indigenous issues in Aotearoa New Zealand. Adult Learners' Week is an annual and internationally sponsored celebration of adult learning and the achievements of adult learners, in which Aotearoa New Zealand has participated for the past 10 years. The proposed research design was outlined by the research team in its proposal to undertake the work. The proposal specified that the views of adult learners, educators and providers across the country would be sought according to the extent to which involvement in Adult Learners' Week strengthened their capacity and capability, advanced the aims of the ACE sector and raised the profile of adult learning. As well as ACE Aotearoa, there were others with an interest in the research. They included local and national ACE practitioners who had been involved in organising the Adult Learners' Week and government bodies such as the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO and the TEC, which had channelled national funding into supporting local and national activities during the week.

ACE Aotearoa had gained funding from the TEC to commission this research and the University of Canterbury ACE Teaching and Research team were contracted to undertake the research on behalf of ACE Aotearoa. The agreed contract specified the research design, timescales and reporting protocols. There was no specific reference to ownership of data or outcomes of the research.

### **Project 3: Advocacy for New Migrants and Refugees — NGO Commissioned; NGO Funded**

Also in 2008, ESOL Home Tutors, a nationally managed and regionally organised NGO working to provide second language teaching to new migrants and refugees, commissioned and funded our team to undertake a small-scale research project exploring the organisation's advocacy role. The project involved a document search and semi-structured interviews with a small number of paid and voluntary workers at different levels within the organisation. The agreed aims of the research were to suggest how ESOL Home Tutors might develop a consistent and organisation-wide approach to advocacy and how they might work towards more clearly defining, profiling and managing the organisation's advocacy activities. The idea for the research emerged from the organisation's strategic review. The project's terms of reference, research design and selection of participants for interview were agreed jointly by the research team leader and the organisation's chief executive. The research was funded directly from the organisation's own resources. The contract between the organisation and the research team asserted the contracting organisation's rights over any material generated by the project.

## **RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS**

Each of the three projects described above involved the development of research relationships with those who had commissioned and funded the research, but also with ACE

practitioners, learners and others whose perspectives were essential to understanding the issues to be explored. However, in each project there were different expectations and motivations for participating in the research and different perspectives on the value of involvement.

In the ACE professional development project (project one) the collaboration of local ACE practitioners was required in order for the team to carry out the research. These practitioners met in regional ACE Networks that had been imposed upon them by the TEC. It was clear from the outset that some of the networks identified as potential participants in the research were sceptical of the TEC's intentions, seeing their professional development initiatives as either a top-down attempt to impose an unwanted degree of 'professionalisation' (Tobias 2003) on the sector and/or a way of placing more responsibilities on already overburdened and under-resourced practitioners. These local practitioners had not been consulted on the research proposal or what their role should be in professional development and there was a sense of grievance that ACE Networks were expected to take on a role for which they did not necessarily feel equipped. The research team needed to respond to the research commissioner's desire to identify how local ACE Networks could meet the sector's professional development needs, whilst gaining the collaboration of those at the grassroots who had a more sceptical view – both of the TEC and of the notion of professional development.

Collaboration therefore had to be negotiated against a commitment on our part to represent practitioners' views. We were assisted by the fact that members of the research team were well known in the ACE sector, familiar with the issues faced by ACE practitioners, and committed to designing the research process that would take into account the strong views of practitioners about the TEC and its plans for them. We adopted data collection methods that offered the ACE practitioners some assurance that views expressed would be protected by the anonymity of the group: data were mainly collected through group interviews and workshop sessions. Where individual interviews were conducted, we ensured that our interpretation of emerging findings was negotiated and agreed with interviewees. In our final report, where we cited cases of professional development activity, we invited those who had provided us with information to specify how the case studies would be written and presented or to write the case studies themselves.

In the Adult Learners' Week project (project two) there were fewer difficulties gaining the participation of practitioners; some had been involved in commissioning the research on behalf of ACE Aotearoa. They therefore had an interest in the research and its findings. They were invited to act as advisers to the project, and to comment on our approach to the research design and our preliminary findings as the research progressed — they were keen to review the extent to which Adult Learners' Week met its aims, and to have the history of their efforts recorded and

disseminated more widely in the ACE sector. In the event, however, the involvement of these advisers was limited to occasional email contact and feedback on the progress of the research since constraints of time, distance and funding for travel militated against greater involvement on their part.

The participation of adult learners was more problematic. We planned to interview learners who had won awards in Adult Learners' Week and anticipated that they would be keen to discuss the impact of the week. This was not the case. Some learners had not understood why they had been given awards or how the week's activities were meant to connect with them as learners. This obviously told us something about the impact of Adult Learners' Week on the public. However, it was problematic for the data collection as a number of the learners we approached were unable or unwilling to answer the questions we posed regarding their perspectives on the week.

Collaboration and participation in the advocacy research project (project three) was more straightforward. The research was commissioned by the organisation, and was to be carried out within the organisation. The researchers worked closely with the organisation's chief executive to design the project. Participation of volunteers and paid staff was gained through the chief executive who set up interviews with an agreed number of participants. The researchers simply collected and analysed the data, having ensured that all parties were clear about the purposes of the research and the questions to be asked. There was a close, collaborative relationship between the researchers and the research commissioner and uncomplicated access to research participants. However, whilst the research was focused on how the organisation responded to migrant language learners' advocacy needs, knowledge of what these needs were was assumed rather than specifically sought from learners. In fact, it was agreed that this project was a small, internally focused pilot project that would inform further research in the future with a wider cross-section of those involved with the organisation.

### **PARTICIPATION AND COLLABORATION: A PICTURE OF COMPLEXITY**

Wadsworth (1998) suggests that, apart from the researchers themselves, there are typically three 'parties' involved in participatory research and therefore three potential categories of collaborator:

- the research commissioners, who identify the research issue and call for the research
- the researched (or research 'participants') from whom information is sought and data collected
- the 'researched for' (or 'stakeholders'), who may be interested in or affected by the research but who may, or may not, be concerned with the research process.

In practice, categorising collaboration is more complex than Wadsworth suggests and our experience leads us to concur with Huxham and Vangen's statement (2005, p. 12) that 'there are no easy routes to success'.

First, categories may overlap: in the Adult Learners' Week project (project 2), the research commissioners were also the researched, as well as the researched for, while other stakeholders (principally learners) were not aware that the research was being carried out or that they were stakeholders. This was also the case for migrants and refugees in the advocacy project (project 3). Within each category, individuals and groups had differing attitudes towards cooperation. Indeed, in the ACE professional development research (project 1), some of the participants were antipathetic to the research being carried out and regarded it as 'window dressing' that ignored the systemic problems in the sector — low levels of funding and the government's own failure to address issues of inequality between Māori and Pakeha.

Whilst in theory the language of collaboration and participation signals 'a political commitment, collaborative processes and participatory world view' (Kindon, Pain & Kesby 2007), this cannot be taken for granted. In the projects described here, there were different levels of collaboration between the different parties to the research, and these varied over time. Drawing on Biggs (1989) and Pretty et al. (1995), we identified the following relationships of collaboration:

- Contractual: where the nature and extent of collaboration is specified in the contract between commissioner and researcher;
- Partnership: where collaborative relationships extend beyond contractual issues, indicating trust, shared purpose and free exchange of information
- Consultative: where views are sought by the researcher on data, emerging analysis and reporting, but which are not necessarily incorporated into research findings
- Informative: where responses are sought to research questions, which are analysed by the researcher without reference back to the research participants.

Table 1, below, reveals the complexity of collaboration.

**Table 1: An analysis of each project in terms of relationships with the parties to the research**

Parties to the research	Relationships in each project		
	ACE Professional Development	Adult Learners' Week	ESOL Home Tutors Advocacy
<b>1. Research commissioners</b>			
Funders	contractual	contractual	contractual
Commissioning organisation	contractual	consultative	partnership
<b>2. The researched (participants)</b>			
Practitioners	consultative/ partnership	consultative	informative
Learners	not researched	informative	not researched
<b>3. The researched for (stakeholders)</b>			
Policy makers	contractual	informative	not included
Learners	not included	informative	not included
External organisations	informative	not included	not included

The analysis suggests the need to assess the potential for collaborations in each situation and the extent to which some collaborators are prioritised over others, as well as why some perspectives (particularly, in these three cases, the perspectives of learners) are excluded from collaborative relationships. In research of this nature, collaboration is not just influenced by the will of the researcher, but by the relationships between and across the parties to the research.

### **WORKING WITH CONFLICTING EXPECTATIONS**

Equally complex is the way in which researchers work with the expectations of the parties to the research. In the advocacy project (project 3) expectations were tightly defined from the outset and limited by the small-scale nature of the project. The research was concerned with definition and clarification, rather than policy change; changes recommended by the researchers concerned the organisation's internal processes. Since the 'researched for' — migrants and refugees, and external organisations — were not included in the research process there was therefore no requirement to manage their expectations.

In contrast, in the ACE professional development project (project 1) there were conflicting expectations for the research. The research brief was rather vaguely expressed and included the aim: '... to explore a range of approaches that ACE Networks could take to meeting sector and individual professional development needs'. This left room for interpretation. It was clear that the TEC and some ACE sector organisations and practitioners had differing expectations. Some practitioners wanted to air grievances about lack of TEC support for the sector. The TEC had an agenda around increasing the involvement of Māori organisations in ACE Regional Networks, whose meetings were attended predominantly by Pakeha practitioners. This was an item that was not high in the list of priorities of many of the ACE Networks, which were mainly focused on organising among those who did attend meetings, rather than reaching out to those who did not. Aware of these conflicting perspectives, the research team had to ensure that ACE practitioners felt their views were being faithfully recorded, whilst reassuring the TEC that the research brief was being adhered to.

Conflicting expectations in the Adult Learners' Week project (project two) emerged during the interviews and at the reporting stage. Different understandings of the aims of Adult Learners' Week emerged as we interviewed key informants. Some felt it should be a vehicle for promoting social justice through adult education; others felt that it should be a celebration of learners' achievements. Some felt that the links between the national aims of the week and its local organisers should be stronger; others felt that the local organisers should be free to interpret the week in their own way. A further issue was around the involvement of Māori ACE practitioners and learners: some felt they achieved this. However, the Māori practitioners we interviewed felt that more

could be done to make the week meaningful for Māori and that greater efforts should be made to ensure Māori practitioners' direct involvement in planning and organising the week.

There were different viewpoints on the extent to which Adult Learners' Week impacted on learners and the general public. In particular, there was disagreement about the value of presenting annual awards to 'outstanding learners'. Whilst some of the learners we interviewed felt encouraged by having their efforts recognised, others were only vaguely aware of the reason for receiving an award or of the purpose of Adult Learners' Week. This finding was unlikely to be welcomed by many practitioners, or by the research commissioners, particularly considering the energy and resources expended in organising awards events across the country. Differences in expectations also emerged at the reporting stage. There were those who wanted the outcome of the research to be a celebratory history of the week. Whilst this seemed important, it was not the whole story and the researchers identified issues that were problematic and put forward a number of recommendations to address them. The research team had to strike a balance between these differing expectations. There was not one 'truth' to be reflected in the research. There were multiple, and sometimes divergent, perspectives.

### **BALANCING CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES: ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY**

Those commissioning collaborative research are likely to have expectations of its outcomes. However, in research of this nature, participants are also entitled to expect that their concerns will be reflected. In projects where there are multiple perspectives, research findings may be contested. We had an obligation to report what one of our research team called 'the hard stuff': findings which research commissioners, participants or stakeholders might find difficult to accept because of their pre-existing points of view (see also Fine et al. 2000, p. 124). A finding which might be acceptable to one party in the research might be disputed by another with a different world view or professional perspective.

In reflecting views that some parties to the research would disagree with, we were vulnerable to charges of selectivity and bias. Ensuring the validity of our findings was a challenge, particularly when they went against the grain of the research commissioners' expectations. Whilst Hammersley (1990, p. 57) defines validity as 'truth', the reality is more complex; 'truth' is not a constant, nor does it take into account differences in world view (House 1980). Validity in the research described here was about credibility, rather than 'truth'.

One way credibility was established was methodologically — through the use of multiple methods and data sources, recycling of data and analysis, member checks, and so on (Erlandson et al. 1993). We 'checked back' with participants that we had drawn our interpretations correctly from the data they had provided. We

offered ongoing feedback about emergent findings to ensure that there were no unwelcome surprises in the final report. In the ACE professional development and the Adult Learners' Week projects, we reported our initial findings at relevant ACE sector conferences; we invited comment on our emergent findings and incorporated feedback from these into our final analysis. Publicly reporting tentative findings brought disagreements into open discussion, earlier rather than later, and made differences of view transparent. A 'no surprises' approach to reporting prepared the way for findings which might not be accepted by all parties to the research.

A naturalistic inquiry approach (Lincoln & Guba 1985) also enabled the research team to follow new lines of inquiry, to undertake further data collection and to investigate emerging differences of view throughout the research process in order to triangulate initial findings. For example, in the Adult Learners' Week project (project two), when our initial interviews with a small number of learners who had been presented with Adult Learners' Week awards revealed that its impact on them had been limited, we followed up with a national survey of learners' awareness. This quantitative data provided further evidence of the low level of public awareness of the week, strengthened the validity of our claim and presented a more credible case to practitioners who were convinced of the effectiveness of their efforts in raising awareness of adult learning.

But credibility is not just about research technique. It also rests on the relationship between the researchers and those with whom they research (House 1980). Credibility entails a sense that researchers understand the field within which they research, and that they respect those with whom they research. The researchers themselves and not just their research tools need to be 'trustworthy'. Huxham and Vangen (2005) suggest a number of ways in which trust can be built and maintained in collaborative working. It may be built incrementally over the course of a research project as joint aims are established and achieved. This was the case in the ACE professional development project (project one) where practitioners' trust in the research process developed over time as the research team demonstrated its willingness to incorporate and report their views faithfully, demonstrating openness through sustained commitment to the issues under investigation (Erlandson et al. 1993). Trust also came with the development of the team's reputation. Research team members were already known within the ACE sector. Aotearoa New Zealand is a country of few people and strong networks. As the team's reputation as researchers developed over time, so issues of trust became less problematic. The advocacy project (project 3) was commissioned as a direct result of the reputation that the team had established over the previous two years. As Huxham and Vangen (2005, pp. 153–70) suggest, issues of trust have to be addressed specifically at the outset of collaboration through an analysis of the power dynamics within the research

collaboration, in particular in terms of who has the power to enact, or even sabotage, agreed agendas. Trust also needs to be nurtured throughout the process of collaboration, by means of regular and clear communication about changes in the research situation or unforeseen findings. Developing and maintaining trust requires not only research skills, but also careful facilitation and negotiation and sustained involvement.

### **SHARING FINDINGS IN CONTRACTED RESEARCH: WHO IS IT FOR?**

Lawrence Stenhouse (1981, p. 104) has described research as ‘systematic inquiry made public’ (Stenhouse’s emphasis), a definition which suggests the importance not only of the research investigation, but also its dissemination. Here we discuss some of the difficulties in ensuring that the results of research reach a wide audience, including those who agreed to collaborate in the research process.

In two of the projects described in this article, the contract between the research team and the research commissioners gave the commissioners sole rights to the ownership of research data and outputs. In the case of the advocacy project (project 3), the research report was intended only for internal consumption within the ESOL Home Tutors’ organisation. In this instance, the organisation’s chief executive undertook to distribute the report widely within the organisation. It was intended that this report would lay the ground for discussion across the organisation and for a second project in the future, which would explore the issue of advocacy with a range of stakeholders, including learners, community organisations and government departments.

In the ACE professional development project (project 1), the research contract specified that, in addition to a full report of the research, the research team should produce brief guidelines for ACE sector practitioners on effective practice in professional development. These guidelines were produced and widely disseminated by the TEC as a ‘toolkit’ containing suggestions for practitioners about how they might make ACE Regional Networks more effective. However, the research team’s more detailed report, which included recommendations to the TEC about its own practice and policy, was not made public by the TEC. The research team sent copies of the full report to all those who had collaborated with the project. We also utilised workshops, training events, meetings and conferences and more accessible publications such as newsletters and web postings in order to disseminate our findings and promote wider discussion of the issues. We did not discuss this with the research commissioners in advance. Whilst this was not in accordance with the letter of our agreed contract, there were no negative consequences from this action. This whole process suggests two things to us. First, that whilst there may be willingness in government-commissioned projects to share findings that indicate what others should do, there is a reluctance

to share those which make recommendations about its own policy or practice. Second, it suggests that there is sometimes more room to manoeuvre around the issue of dissemination than implied in contracts and that alternative methods of dissemination (Sommer 2009) can be used effectively in the ACE sector, particularly if researchers are prepared to prolong their involvement beyond the terms of the research contract (Erlandson et al. 1993).

In the Adult Learners' Week project, whilst the contract did not specify ownership, the research commissioner endeavoured to assert sole rights to dissemination of the project report, once it had been presented. The report — which included a history of Adult Learners' Week as well as recommendations about how the impact of the week could be strengthened and how the involvement of Māori organisations could be further encouraged — was not disseminated by the commissioning organisation to the ACE sector as a whole or even to those who had participated in the data collection. The researchers sent the report to participants, against the wishes of the commissioning organisation. Although this caused some heated discussion between researcher and commissioner representatives, it did not result in sanctions against the research team. The report was discussed internally within the commissioning organisation but the outcomes of these discussions were not made known to those who had an interest in the research. We conclude from this that, even where contracts do not specify ownership of data or research outcomes, there can be implicit assumptions about ownership and dissemination rights which may need to be tested.

In a research process which seeks to be collaborative, research participants as well as research commissioners have an interest in ensuring research findings are acted on. At the very minimum, researchers endeavouring to adopt a collaborative approach have an ethical duty to ensure that they honour any commitments to participants. Whilst we would not dispute that it is important for contracted researchers to meet their obligations to funders, we would argue that there is an imperative to honour commitments to other parties, particularly in the context of a collaborative research process. There is also a commitment on the part of academic researchers to honour some of the values and assumptions underlying their role.

Bridges (1998) puts forward a number of grounds on which contractual provisions which give research commissioners control over ownership of data are inimical to the notion of research. First, peer review and academic scrutiny are the means by which the quality of research is assured in academic life. To bar researchers from presenting their findings in academic forums is to undermine the process by which knowledge is verified and findings given credence. It also effectively prevents the academic from doing what she/he is employed to do, namely to undertake research and present the results of such research for academic scrutiny.

Second, if government or non-government organisations sponsor research whose aim is to evaluate the effectiveness of their practices or policies, the failure to make public the findings of such research defeats the very purpose of research. It also suggests that there may be a hidden agenda in research commissioning: to use the 'quality assurance' stamp of academic research to demonstrate the credibility and efficacy of the commissioners' policies and practices, but to suppress findings which do not confirm this.

Third, Bridges argues that if public money is utilised to commission research, then there is a duty (within certain common-sense parameters) to release the results into the public domain. It is, after all, the taxpayer who funds the research. In this sense, the wider community also has rights of ownership.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, academic freedom is guaranteed under the *Education Amendment Act 1999*, which asserts the academic's public role as 'critic and conscience of society' (Jones, Galvin & Woodhouse 2000). In a contracting culture, this role becomes clouded by notions of 's/he who pays the piper calls the tune'. Researchers therefore need to steer a way through issues of integrity and public accountability. One option — and it is a tempting one — is to eschew involvement in research contracting altogether. However, such a position is scarcely tenable in the climate in which academics currently live.

Other options are in the hands of researchers making bids for and entering into research contracts. Our experience suggests that it is important to raise the issue of ownership at the start, rather than at the end of a contract's life, and to negotiate around specific aspects of dissemination in advance. Aspects which could usefully have been negotiated in relation to projects in the ACE sector include the right to offer an independent assessment in relation to a topic of research and to offer this assessment in public forums; the necessity of including follow-up and dissemination within the proposed research design; the right of research participants to receive feedback on any research findings that have been arrived at as a result of their collaboration in the research process; and the detail of which issues were for public consumption and which were not.

Our experience also suggests to us that pushing the boundaries of contracts is not impossible and that there is perhaps more leeway for contracted academics than they might suppose. They may run the risk of disputes with research commissioners, but commissioners are also likely to be sensitive to public accusations of censorship and suppression of evidence and may be unwilling to press their rights to ownership too far (Bridges 1998).

However, university employees are not entirely free agents when it comes to agreeing research contracts. There is another option (which Bridges also suggests) and that is in the hands of universities, which encourage academics to undertake contracted research in order to raise income. If academic involvement in

research (contracted or otherwise) really does imply certain ethical and quality standards, then universities need to assert these standards by ensuring that the contracts they sign on behalf of their academic staff do not give away the right to independence of thought, freedom of speech, maintenance of ethical standards and public obligation.

### CONCLUSION

Undertaking contract research within a collaborative framework raises challenges about what collaboration means in practice and about managing conflicting expectations. A strong collaborative research team, a flexible approach to research design and the deliberate building of a relationship of trust through good communication and transparent action help in this process. However, the final challenge for contracted researchers keen to contribute to change through research is whether they are able to resolve the issue of who such research is for and to establish and pursue their responsibilities for acting on research findings. These are issues on which we continue to reflect, as we navigate the intersections of collaboration, contracted research and academia.

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