

CHAPTER 3. BASIS OF THE PROCESS

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH DESIGN

Research designs may be classified broadly into five types: survey research, case study research, experimental and quasi-experimental research, ex post facto research, and analysis of databases and records (Connole, Smith and Wiseman, 1990:59). The selection of a particular research design is determined by a number of factors, such as the research field, the framing of the research hypothesis, and practical considerations.

Research designs may be categorised in different ways. They may be exploratory/descriptive or explanatory. In the former category, the focus is on ‘how things are’, whereas the latter category of research design focusses on relationships. Another categorisation of research designs is cross-sectional vs. longitudinal. In a cross-sectional study, a ‘snap-shot’ in time of the research group is taken, whereas in a longitudinal study, the study group is examined at regular intervals over time. A third categorisation is population versus sample. Sampling is used if the researcher wishes to make inferences about the total population based on a study of a sample group. If the researcher wishes to study a local population and not make inferences about the total population, or the population being studied involves all the units of analysis, then sampling is not necessary.

The survey is one of the most commonly used data-gathering techniques in research in the human sciences.

“Survey research studies large and small populations (or universes) by selecting and studying samples chosen from the populations to discover the relative incidence, distribution and interrelations of sociological and psychological variables” (Kerlinger, 1986:377).

While survey designs have a number of advantages and disadvantages, the survey was considered most appropriate for this research. Surveys are flexible, relatively easy to use and can allow access to large samples or populations if a postal questionnaire is used. Their design allows them to be accessible to interested parties, and to be easily repeatable.

A disadvantage of surveys is that the data gathered can be rather shallow or ‘thin’ compared with interviewing. This was not considered a significant factor for this research, as the researcher is gathering exploratory/descriptive data rather than explanatory data.

All secondary schools have Principals, and all school councils have a council chairperson, and council members. These three groups were selected as being most able to provide information about the structure, organization and operation of college councils. Not all councils have parent, staff or student representation, nor are college chaplains necessarily members of the college councils. These groups therefore were not surveyed.

As the colleges are located in South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, the use of an interview technique was considered inappropriate, both in terms of the time and costs involved in doing so. The writer did not have the time or financial capacity to travel to each of the above-mentioned states to interview a sample of principals, council members and council chairpersons. Some interviews of council members, as well as of one college principal, within the locality of the writer, did provide some additional information. Additionally, the writer’s own employment within a college at the time of the research, and previous employment in Lutheran schools, gave the writer access to information about the way college councils operate.

However, the use of an interview technique was also considered to have another drawback. The nature of the writer’s employment within one of the colleges at the time of the conduct of the research, is considered to have been disadvantageous to obtaining a full and frank opinion from council members, due to their anonymity not being able to be preserved. The use of a survey instrument not requiring disclosure of the identity of the respondent has allowed respondents to be quite frank in their responses.

THE QUESTIONNAIRES

Three separate questionnaires were prepared (Appendices A, B, C). The first was addressed to the chairperson of the council, seeking information about the actual structure and operation of the council. The other two questionnaires were similar in design, one

being sent to the college principal, and the other to members of councils. These questionnaires were designed to elicit their opinions about how they felt college councils should operate. The questionnaires were designed to be completed in about fifteen minutes. The majority of questions were Yes/No or multiple choice questions.

Of nineteen colleges/schools, eighteen were surveyed. The nineteenth college at the time of the survey was still being established.

The issues chosen to research through the surveys were selected on the basis of the literature review and the Constitutional By-Laws of the Lutheran Church. The literature reviews identified more frequently occurring themes which were of concern to principals, council members and chairpersons in other independent secondary colleges in Australia. These were probably also of concern in Lutheran secondary schools. The constitutional By-Laws of the District, which are meant to direct to some extent the way councils operate, generated a second type of question. The researcher was interested to see whether these By-Laws were being adhered to, and how they influenced the operation of councils.

The questionnaires deliberately did not ask for reasons to be given for responses. Any worthwhile analysis and discussion of such responses would have been beyond the scope of this research. Thus, the questionnaires basically sought to establish the 'status quo' of the college councils, and to pose questions for further research.

SAMPLE

As the total number of Lutheran colleges in Australia at the time of the survey was nineteen, and in consideration of the research methodology chosen, it was considered appropriate to survey all of the colleges, with the exception of the one in its early establishment phase. Thus, the survey is comprehensive, and not based on a selected sample of the total population.

Sampling was not necessary for this research, as the population size is such that all the 'units' of analysis can be surveyed. Thus, no generalisation of the results from a sample group to the total population is necessary nor is the variance of responses an issue.

The total number of Lutheran secondary colleges in Australia at the time of the research was nineteen. This number was considered not too large for every college to be surveyed. Based on the premise that the average size of each council is ten members, the maximum number of responses from council members would be 190.

DATA ANALYSIS

Upon return, the survey forms were sorted according to respondent – principal, council chairperson, and council member. The total number of survey forms returned was recorded, and compared with the maximum possible number of returns. In the case of the principal and council chairpersons responses, this number was eighteen. While the number of council members in all of the colleges surveyed was not ascertained, the total possible number of returns from council members would be in excess of 150, given each council has 9-10 members.

For each question on each of the surveys, the responses were collated into a summary sheet. In addition, any comments or notes made on any responses were also collated and listed. This information is presented in Chapter 4.