Organising data

It is not uncommon for even the smallest of inquiries to generate a large amount of data. A questionnaire comprising ten questions that is answered by ten people will generate 100 responses for analysis. Interviews can take a considerable amount of time to transcribe and check (roughly 5 hours for a half-hour interview).

Having a disciplined and organised strategy for recording and storing data as it is collected can save many hours being spent unnecessarily at a later point. Each handwritten record should be clearly marked with relevant information and filed carefully. Electronic data also needs to be named using a clear system for later identification.

Lost data can cause immense stress and undermine a well designed project, so it is wise to keep a back-up copy. Whether as photocopies of documents or a CD of electronic data, some form of 'insurance policy' is important.

Keeping track of progress

The greater the number of interviews, questionnaires, observations and documents that are involved in the course of a project, the greater the volume of data. In the interest of time management, it can be beneficial to begin some elements of data analysis before all of the data collection phase is completed.

A system that accurately keeps up-to-date information on the data collected, data to be collected, and data at stages of analysis is well worth the time invested in setting it up.

Personal preference will influence the type of system used keeping track of progress. A card index, box or suspension files, computer, research log book, or a combination, are typical methods. Whatever method of recording data collection is used, it should be easily cross-referenced to the actual data records.

Keeping on track

Data tracking is particularly important when questionnaires are used to gather data. A record of when questionnaires are distributed and when they are received back will flag up overdue data. A preliminary return date can be planned into the process to act as a trigger for the researcher

to send reminders to participants. Notes about difficulties experienced during data collection can be a useful aide memoir when writing your final report.

Interviews may be postponed due to circumstances beyond the researcher's control, and here again it is supportive to have a system that identifies where the research process has reached and how re-arranged interviews can be managed.

Data collection can take up a large proportion of research time, and if the research is being undertaken by a group of people, a clear system for dividing tasks and keeping records of progress can make the project run smoothly and avoid misunderstandings.