

# learning landscape project

## Research Methods: Case Records

### About the Case Records

Case Records were used by the Learning Landscape Project to document teaching and learning practices within single institutions/disciplines at the University of Cambridge. A standard Case Record Template was devised by the researchers, with input from the project Steering Group, and was designed to allow the capturing of information from disparate sources and to facilitate comparison of learning and teaching practice across institutions. Case Records sought to bring together pre-existing data sources, while also drawing on new data generated by the project. Case Records were produced for internal research purposes, and are independent of formal quality assurance or institutional audit processes.

### Rationale and Research Warrant

The Case Records were designed to highlight the role of Faculties and Departments in teaching and learning. The Case Records therefore also investigated the role of subjects and disciplines in Cambridge's educational provision. They were intended to enhance communications and knowledge transfer across institutions, by facilitating the sharing of 'good practice', and by highlighting shared issues and challenges.

Case study research is a technique much used in organizational research, among other fields. Case Records were inspired by case study technique, but unlike most case studies, were designed to be descriptive, rather than interpretive. The guiding principles governing the compilation of Case Records were to achieve "referential integrity" and to enable the subsequent reuse of project data. The principle of referential integrity is considered standard "good practice" in qualitative research, but in fact, is rarely followed (Heaton 2008). Statements in the case record should be verifiable, and should point towards the original data sources used in compiling the document. In this way, readers who wished to do so could check case record data against the sources used, and/or review original data sources with a view to performing a new analysis of an existing data set.

### Process

The first stage in compiling Case Records was to conduct desk research, reviewing existing documentation on teaching and learning from the institution concerned. The next stage was to conduct a face-to-face interview with one or more members of teaching staff (interview protocols and processes are described separately, in the LLP Research Methods Report on 'Coffee Meeting Interviews'). In some cases, researchers conducted repeat interviews with the same staff member(s); in others, they conducted additional follow-up research with staff by telephone or email.

Data collection and writing-up of Case Records were informal and iterative processes, with interview participants and other staff invited to review and comment on draft versions of documents, prior to circulation to the project Steering Group. Unlike some data collected by the Learning Landscape Project (such as student experience data, which captured specific 'moments in time'), Case Records were considered as 'works-in-progress', reflecting ongoing internal institutional processes of evolution and review. In some cases, Case Records were reviewed by the departmental Teaching and Learning Committee. The Case Record method was itself subject to review by the research team and project Steering Group: five successive versions of the Case Record Template were developed over the course of the project.

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## Structure of the Case Records

*At a Glance:* Overview of staff/student numbers, courses, assessment, and other key indicators

*Key Respondents:* Names and roles of interviewees and key respondents

*Sources of Information:* Key sources and weblinks used to compile the document

*Demographics:* Staff and student numbers

*Organisational Issues:* Educational issues that have been identified at organizational level

*Teaching and Learning Environments and Activities:* Overview of educational activities, their purpose and interrelationships

*Online Resources and Teaching with Technology:* Use of computers and technology-based resources, tools, and environments for teaching and learning

*Student Societies and Community Outreach:* The role of student societies and community liaison

*Current and Recent Initiatives and Innovations:* Current and recent initiatives and innovations

*Live Issues:* Self-identified issues or problems in teaching and learning

*Culture and Specific Practices:* Characteristic aspects of organizational culture

*Emerging Themes:* Research findings or areas which are relevant across one or more Case Records

*Student Perspectives:* Relevant student perspectives on teaching and learning

## Benefits of the Case Records

The standard format of the Case Records helped the project team to create a research “template” and process that streamlined data collection, and enabled the researchers to compare and synthesise information about teaching and learning across Faculties and Departments. Case Records were useful in terms of enabling identification of shared innovations and challenges across non-cognate discipline areas, such as the use of peer learning in Mathematics and Law, or the role of experiential learning in Computer Science and English. Case Records also helped the project team to identify areas for further research. The iterative process of reviewing and adding to the Case Records helped researchers to initiate and consolidate working relationships with respondents and Steering Group members over time, and helped staff to have confidence in the process.

The process of producing the Case Records has confirmed the central role of the disciplines in a Cambridge education: disciplines appear to offer an important source of identity for students and staff; they introduce students to the ‘ways of thinking’ that characterize a field (including epistemological, methodological and ethical principles, as well as ‘content’ knowledge); and at organizational level, they are a central organizing principle for the design and structure of educational programmes.

## About the Learning Landscape Project

The Learning Landscape Project (2006—2008) is a research project that was initiated to create a descriptive framework of learning and teaching at the University of Cambridge.

For further information, please visit the project website:

<http://www.caret.cam.ac.uk/learninglandscape/>

## References and Further Reading

- Heaton, J. (2008). “Secondary analysis of qualitative data.” In: Alasuutari, P., Bickman, L. and Brannen, J. (eds.), *The Handbook of Social Research Methods*. London: Sage.
- ESDS (Economic and Social Data Service) (2007). “Reusing Qualitative Data: A Step-by-Step ESDS Qualidata Guide.” <http://www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/support/reuse.asp> [Last access: 27/05/2008]
- Stake, R. E. (2000). “Case studies.” In: Denzin, Norman K. and Lincoln, Yvonna S. (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage. pp. 435-453.