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ARCHDIOCESE
CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

THE INSIDERS' GUIDE

Helping researchers and schools
get the most out of working together





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Have you ever been involved in a school research project that looked good on paper, but in practice didn't work out the way you'd hoped?

Have you ever designed research without really knowing if schools would see the value or engage in the project?

Have you ever been asked to participate in a research project that didn't quite align with your school's needs?

Whether you're from a school or a research organisation – and whether you answered “yes” to one or all of the above – you want any research project you're engaged in to be as meaningful, engaging and impactful as possible.

And that's why we developed *The Insiders' Guide* – a guide that seeks to help researchers and schools get the most out of working together.

Why did we call it ***The Insiders' Guide***? Because it's informed by those most intimately involved in academic research in schools – school staff and researchers themselves.

'The Insiders'.



The inside story on *The Insiders' Guide*

The Insiders' Guide was developed by Catholic Education Melbourne (CEM), now known as Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (MACS).

MACS works to foster conditions for deep systemic improvement to enable the best educational outcome for every student. As part of this we advise on and support a wide range of academic or externally led research in our schools.

We know that the best of these research projects are a win-win for all involved.

However, we've discovered that despite well-intentioned researchers and schools investing time, energy and resources, in practice, best-case outcomes aren't always being achieved.

The USER Project

In 2016, CEM (now known as MACS) conducted the **Understanding School Engagement in Research (USER)** project to better understand, if and how, schools engage in academic research projects. Before the USER project, the experiences of schools as research participants was largely unknown.

The USER Project was just the beginning. In partnership with various schools and universities, MACS has conducted ongoing research and analysis, including:

- surveys and focus groups with school staff
- interviews with school leaders
- workshops and interviews with university researchers
- literature reviews
- a 'World Café'-style workshop with schools and researchers.

Encapsulating the key insights from this research and analysis, *The Insiders' Guide* seeks to enhance understandings of academic and externally-led research conducted in schools, and positively influence future practice.

The ultimate goal: improving outcomes for schools and researchers.

More information and resources can be found at <https://www.macs.vic.edu.au/About-Us/Research-in-Schools/USER-project.aspx>.





RECIPES FOR SUCCESS

Clear objectives
+ clearly
communicated
to staff

Aligning
school's
vision with
research

Follow-up +
sharing of
findings

Identified
a "champion"
to lead in
school



How to use this guide

The Insiders' Guide is for schools and academic and external researchers who want to get the most out of current and future school-based research projects.

As this guide contains insights, ideas and perspectives from both schools and researchers, it is crucial that you read the whole guide for a more complete understanding of both the potential challenges and opportunities.

Every research project is different and *The Insiders' Guide* is not designed to be a 'how to' document; rather a useful tool, conversation starter and ideas generator.

Finding common ground

What's not working? And why not?

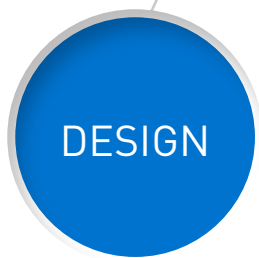
Early into our investigations, MACS realised that although some research projects in schools have been successful, many haven't quite hit the mark.

The USER project revealed that on average, schools say "no" to 4 out of 5 research requests (Catholic Education Melbourne, 2018).

To find out why, we spoke to both school representatives and researchers. Surprisingly, after hearing a range of perspectives, MACS recognised that the barriers and challenges that could undermine the success of a research project in a school were similar for both parties.

Understanding each other's perspectives helps us break down barriers and solve problems. We believe that a greater appreciation of this 'common ground' could help schools and researchers work together to improve how effectively schools are engaged in future research projects, leading to better experiences for all involved.





1 Conflicting priorities

SCHOOLS are often juggling issues such as curriculum, reporting, assessment, legislative requirements, staff and student wellbeing and parent expectations. If research does not align or 'fit in' with these demands and priorities, schools may be less focused on and engaged with the project.

RESEARCHERS are often juggling various research projects, stakeholder expectations and success measures, as well as multiple roles (studying, teaching, presenting, researching and writing). This can impact on a researcher's ability to be flexible and align research to school priorities.

2 Timelines and schedules

SCHOOLS are busy places and sometimes changes to schedules and timetables required to participate in a research project are inevitable. This can be challenging to manage, placing added strain on school staff and resources. Projects that take the school year into consideration have a greater chance of school participation and engagement.

RESEARCHERS generally need to adhere to tight timeline constraints and carefully planned schedules. Changes that might appear insignificant from a school's point of view can impact funding applications, research participation, and the ability to customise the research to individual school needs.

3 Funding and resources

SCHOOLS may have limited time, space and resources to allocate to a research project. These limitations can directly affect participation and, ultimately, impact on the overall research.

RESEARCHERS only have access to limited funding and therefore rely on the goodwill of schools to arrange staff and student supervision, consent and work spaces. This can inhibit a researcher's capacity to actively engage schools and may put strain on school/researcher relationships.

4 Engagement

SCHOOLS staff often wear a number of 'hats' and are primarily focused on learning and teaching. This means staff can be reluctant to take on responsibility for another project, especially if the research benefits are not immediately obvious.

RESEARCHERS can find it difficult to recruit research participants and keep busy staff members engaged. This may affect the researcher's enthusiasm for the project, make it challenging to align the research with school values and priorities, and can affect the overall quality of research outcomes.

5 Access and communication

SCHOOLS may not be provided with the research findings or find those that are provided difficult to understand. Therefore, schools may struggle to use the learnings to inform aspects of their teaching practice or future decision-making processes.

RESEARCHERS may find it hard to get access to those they want to talk to, be it principals, lead staff, parents or students. Researchers may also find it difficult to communicate research opportunities in a way that schools understand or connect with, which may undermine the potential benefits of a project.

Ideals for engagement

Creating an environment for success

Despite the challenges and barriers, we know that when research in schools goes well, it benefits both parties.

Successful research projects can help schools improve by developing staff capabilities, informing decision-making, strengthening teaching and learning, and ultimately improving student outcomes. These projects also give researchers an opportunity to make research truly relevant to the communities they wish to benefit.

Again, MACS' research and analysis has shown that the key reasons research succeeds are similar for everyone involved.

The projects that schools and researchers agree work well:

1. Demonstrate clear benefits

The benefits of the research are clearly defined and communicated in the early stages. These benefits outweigh the time, cost and resource demands on the school.

“There’s got to be pay off for the school – it needs to move us in the right direction.”

2. Are school-specific and flexible

The project and research questions are relevant to the specific school or group of schools, relate to an outcome of interest, and/or align with the school’s overarching vision. Where possible, the research project and approach can be customised to suit the unique needs of the school, or to fit with the needs or characteristics of the broader school community.

“You can’t design top-down and not involve the people within the project who may have suggestions that really add value to your process. It’s better to understand your context and connect this upwards to the project aims.”



3. Involve relationships of trust

Throughout the project, researchers engage with and involve school staff and respect their experiences and agency. Schools want to feel as if they are in partnership with researchers – working *with*, rather than having research done *to* them. In turn, school leaders are accessible to researchers, and fully engaged with and supportive of the project.

“We’re going on a journey together. We’ve got to build relationships that are based on mutual respect and trust.”

4. Offer clear learnings and potential impacts

Schools need project findings that are easy to access and in a format that schools can engage with and consider the implications on their school community. Researchers want schools to be open to reflecting on their thinking and practice, and how the research might shape insights or future developments.

“Researchers need to help schools understand learnings and what to do with them. Schools need to let researchers know what the impacts have been.”

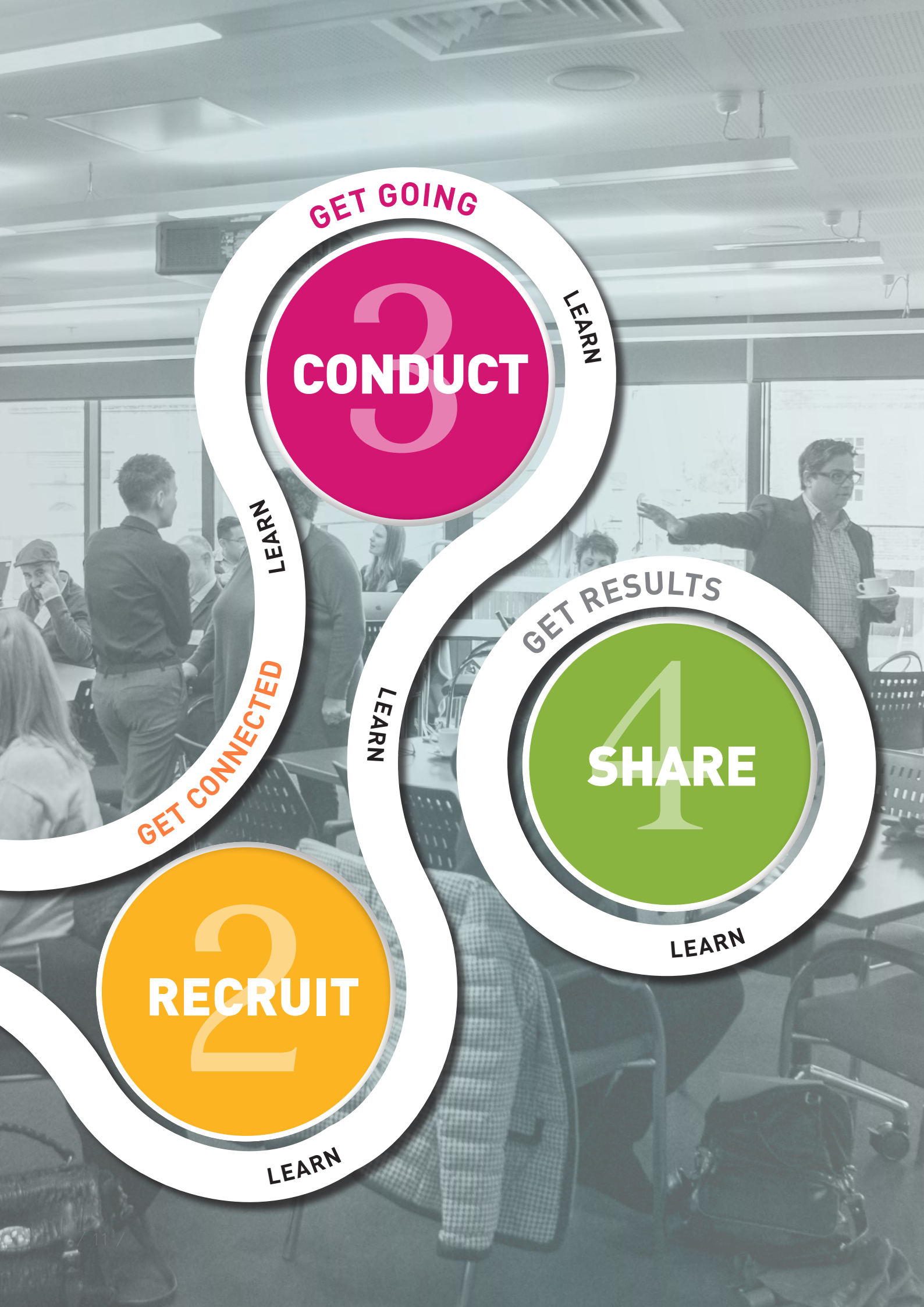


STRENGTHENING ENGAGEMENT AT EACH PHASE OF A RESEARCH PROJECT

With a better sense of what makes a research project successful (and what some of the key challenges are), where do you go from here?

The following 'framework' is a simple way to present four key phases of a research project. It is designed to help you think about how to strengthen engagement at each phase and give each project the best chance of success.





GET GOING

3
CONDUCT

LEARN

LEARN

GET CONNECTED

LEARN

GET RESULTS

4
SHARE

LEARN

2
RECRUIT

LEARN

1 DESIGN

Get started – design and 'scope' the research

- Work together to shape the research questions and design of the project.
- Clarify prior knowledge and learnings, and integrate these into the project.
- Identify resources, gaps and barriers that may arise.
 - Refine definitions, expectations and context of the project.

UNDERSTANDING THE 4 PHASES

Every research project, school and researcher is different, so you may not follow the phases in a sequential fashion. And it may not be practical or necessary to adopt every suggestion for every research project. You can dip in and out of the framework as it suits your project, and engage with the phases and ideas in a flexible way.

2 RECRUIT

Get connected – get participants on board and on the same page

- Negotiate and document the specific conditions of engagement. Who's doing what? What can the researcher 'give back'?
- Clearly outline the project and provide details upfront: e.g. instruments, key contacts, data collection, use of rooms, timing.
 - Discuss and try to minimise excess demands and any potential risks.
 - Outline and begin the agreed consent process.



There are four very different research scenarios on pages 19-23 that show how actions taken to strengthen engagement at each of the four stages can vary significantly – dictated by the specifics of the research project.

See the Research Scenarios using the 4 phases – Design, Recruit, Conduct, Share

Click here



3 CONDUCT

Get going – start the fieldwork process

- Ensure research materials and processes are user-friendly (e.g. translated for families who speak languages other than English).
- Build capability through professional learning.
- Keep the lines of communication open. Do staff, parents, students need to know what's happening, when and why?
 - Review timelines and schedules regularly.
 - Be flexible – what's working and what isn't? What can be changed?

4 SHARE

Get results – share findings in a meaningful way

- Ensure schools receive findings in a timely manner.
- Present school-specific project findings in a useable and actionable format.
- Offer support and guidance to help schools consider potential implications, developments and changes.
 - If applicable, connect findings to other learning areas.
 - Seek school feedback on future research and what might be done differently next time.

LEARN THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS

Learn the school context and desires of the school – ideally before the Design phase. This helps both parties work out if the partnership will be mutually beneficial and sustainable.

Learn throughout the research process and make changes as required.

Learn how best to communicate, organise and take action on the knowledge and findings along the way.

Learn how an ongoing relationship can be fostered between the school and researcher beyond the life of a project.

LEARN

1

LEARN

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LEARN

3

LEARN

4

LEARN



Getting the most out of research in schools

A well-thought out approach to research can save time, resources and stress, and is more likely to produce better outcomes for all.

Use these questions as a starting point to help you get the most out of research projects. They can also be helpful for informing a conversation between the school and researcher. We understand not every question will be relevant or possible for all research projects, but responding to even one or two questions can make a big difference to the engagement experience of schools, as well as the research outcomes.

Questions to consider and discuss together

SCHOOLS

Does the research explore areas that are **relevant** to school needs and priorities?

Do you have the **capacity** to participate? Have you explained any **potential barriers** or issues to the researcher, such as conflicting timelines, excessive time demand, or sensitivities?

Who will be your **'project leader'**? Can this person sustain their involvement throughout the process?

What **resources** will you provide, and what can the researcher/s offer?

Does the project include some form of **professional development** or capacity building component for staff?

Have you **communicated the purpose** of the research and what is expected to staff, students and/or parents?

How will the project findings be **presented**? Will the format be useable and appropriate?

How will you **follow-up and share** the research findings with the wider community and parents?

Can you **realistically implement** the learnings and potential implications following this research?

What will happen when the research is over? Will the **relationship continue**, and if so, how?

sharing of findings

implementation of findings

time frame of engagement

access for broader community

Teacher agency

Team leader in school

Well-resourced

RESEARCHERS

Have you taken the time to build **personal relationships** with school stakeholders?

What's the school's **backstory**? Have you discussed research projects they have been involved with in the past? What worked and what didn't?

Have you considered the school's **priorities and values**, and communicated how this research aligns?

Do you understand the **unique school context** and environment, and will your methods work here?

Have you set an **appropriate and mutually agreeable timeframe**?

What **resources** will you provide, and what will the school need to provide or do?

What is your scope for **flexibility and customisation** in line with school/student needs, and have you clearly communicated this?

What **tangible benefits** are you offering (e.g. staff training, a school-specific report)?

How do you plan to **follow-up and share findings** with the school? What's the best channel for this?

What will happen when the research is over? Will the **relationship continue**, and if so, how?

TRUST - ~~you~~ need teachers to come along with you.

Understanding busy nature of schools.

Sensitivity to different kinds of research.

of stakeholders

Schools

Consent for student to participate - giving an appropriate method /

Context of schools & culture of

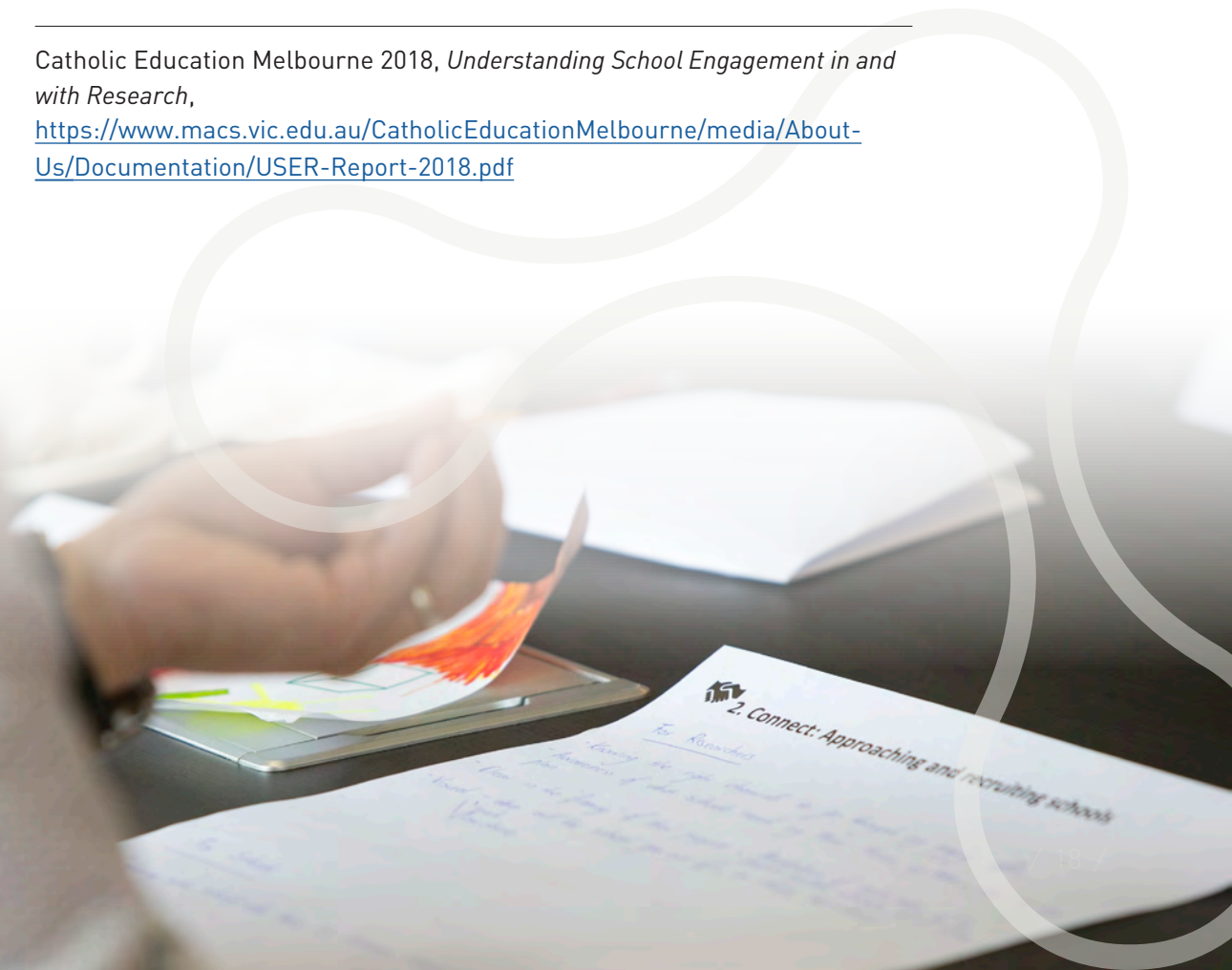
Continuing the journey

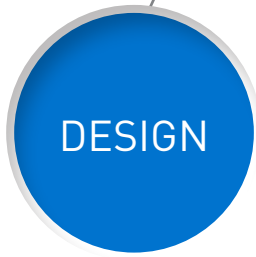
While you may have come to the end of *The Insider's Guide*, your journey continues beyond here. The following ideas can help you on a path towards more meaningful, engaging and impactful research in schools:

- Share this document around your organisation or school. What resonates with your staff/colleagues? Set up a meeting to discuss together.
- Review the 'Ideals for Engagement' on pages 8 and 9. What would you do differently next time when leading or engaging in a research project?
- Use the questions on pages 16 and 17 as a 'cheat sheet' to help you shape your next research proposal or grant submission.
- Use *The Insiders' Guide* when discussing whether to participate in a research project or when negotiating a project with a school or researcher.
- Share your comments and views on *The Insiders' Guide* with us via research@macs.vic.edu.au

Reference

Catholic Education Melbourne 2018, *Understanding School Engagement in and with Research*,
<https://www.macs.vic.edu.au/CatholicEducationMelbourne/media/About-Us/Documentation/USER-Report-2018.pdf>





RESEARCH SCENARIOS USING THE 4 PHASES:

DESIGN

RECRUIT

CONDUCT

SHARE

RESEARCH SCENARIOS USING THE 4 PHASES

Design, Recruit, Conduct and Share

Scenario 1 A well-known not-for-profit agency is approaching schools across Australia to recruit year 10 students for a large scale annual youth mental health survey.



1

GET STARTED

DESIGN

Design and 'scope' the research

Feedback is sought from school principals on current priorities/issues to inform the next reiteration of the survey

'Trusting a principal's knowledge of their school community is fundamental'

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GET CONNECTED

RECRUIT

Get participants on board and on the same page

Information is open and clear, and does not down-play any aspects of risk or sensitivity

Copies of the survey are provided to the Principal and Wellbeing Leader within the school so they are aware of any sensitive questions and risks

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4

GET RESULTS

SHARE

Share findings in a meaningful way

School level and overall reports are provided in a timely manner so that findings are still relevant

Resources are developed to assist schools in addressing relevant issues arising from the report

LEARN

GET GOING

CONDUCT

Start the fieldwork process

Timelines for completion of surveys take into account the school year e.g. avoids NAPLAN and reporting periods

Schools plan to do the survey during regular health classes, so connections can be made to the health curriculum and students can talk through issues raised in the survey

3

RESEARCH SCENARIOS USING THE 4 PHASES

Design, Recruit, Conduct and Share

Scenario 2 A PhD student approaches one school to be involved in a case study looking at the effects of feedback on student agency in mathematics.



1

GET STARTED

DESIGN
Design

The researcher meets with the Principal during the development of her research to strengthen the research questions and make sure there is also benefit to the school

LEARN

2

GET CONNECTED

RECRUIT
Get participants on board and on the same page

In negotiating the research parameters, the principal offers the researcher use of office space to support her project and invites her to attend staff meetings during her time at the school

LEARN

3

GET GOING

CONDUCT
Start the fieldwork process

The research will involve two short professional learning sessions for school staff on giving feedback and student agency

4

GET RESULTS

SHARE
Share findings in a meaningful way

The researcher plans to produce a user-friendly summary of the research findings, including potential implications for the classroom. She will present the findings at a staff meeting and seek feedback on the implications

'Sending out findings is important and finding out the best method of providing feedback'

LEARN

RESEARCH SCENARIOS USING THE 4 PHASES

Design, Recruit, Conduct and Share

Scenario 3 Ten schools are being recruited to conduct a randomised controlled trial on the effectiveness of a secondary school physical activity program.



1

GET STARTED

DESIGN

Design and 'scope' the research

Careful consideration is given to the demand on schools, in particular the control groups

Data collection will cease after 18 months, after which the control schools will be offered the program at no cost

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GET CONNECTED

RECRUIT

Get participants on board and on the same page

Schools are given 6 months' notice so they can plan for the 10 week program the following year

Active parent consent is sought because student height and weight is being measured. 'Conversation starters' are also provided with the consent form to encourage family discussions about the research

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4

GET RESULTS

SHARE

Share findings in a meaningful way

Schools are offered a planning session with the researcher to help them use the findings to implement a whole-school approach to physical activity

'There is a difference between making a change versus the sustainability of that change within a school'

LEARN

GET GOING

CONDUCT

Start the fieldwork process

The program is conducted in regular physical education classes to minimise the burden on schools, and the researcher provides weekly support to the teachers

RESEARCH SCENARIOS USING THE 4 PHASES

Design, Recruit, Conduct and Share

Scenario 4 A cluster of four primary schools approach a university to help them evaluate a recently introduced parent engagement strategy.



1

GET STARTED

DESIGN

Design and 'scope' the research
Researchers work closely with the schools to develop evaluation questions and methodology that are of mutual benefit to the schools and researchers

LEARN

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GET CONNECTED

RECRUIT

Get participants on board and on the same page
Schools commit fully to the evaluation, includes gaining parent support
The researchers will work closely and flexibly to manage the workload for school staff

LEARN

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3

GET GOING

CONDUCT

Start the fieldwork process
Parent focus groups are held during parent teacher interviews to maximise participation
Interim findings are provided to the schools to inform their annual reports to the school community

4

GET RESULTS

SHARE

Share findings in a meaningful way
Parents are invited to a session to hear a summary of parent feedback, and to inform recommendations for future parent engagement strategies

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