

# METHODS BRIEFING 12

## Benchmarking good practice in qualitative management research

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The Programme aims to develop qualitative and quantitative methods within the context of substantive research. It also aims to encourage effective dissemination of good practice.

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### Background and aims

The project aimed to enhance the quality of qualitative research conducted within the business and management field. The specific objectives of the project were to conduct a systematic investigation into current perceptions of qualitative methods in management research. These focused upon issues such as barriers to their use; the ways in which they were assessed; how people defined good practice in this area; and any skills deficits in the researcher community. Training materials were then produced and disseminated to encourage good practice in this area.

During the first stage we conducted a piece of research designed to find out how quality was assessed in qualitative research in the business and management area. The findings from that stage then led to the design of a set of workshop based training materials aimed at addressing the training needs and skill deficits that had been diagnosed.

### The research stage

The research stage of the project involved a review of the literature and a series of 45 in-depth interviews with members of four different groups who have an interest in this area. The groups were:

- key gatekeepers such as those who edited journals, and funded qualitative research

- practitioners who used qualitative research such as opinion pollers and consultants;
- university doctoral programme leaders;
- qualitative researchers.

It was apparent that a variety of definitions of qualitative management research were in use. This indicates the range of work in the area but also implies that the derivation of a set of universal assessment criteria is problematic. A key issue that emerged was the extent to which qualitative research was viewed as credible. Sources of research credibility varied widely and in general definitions of credibility were seen to be associated with the quantification of data and were therefore seen to disadvantage qualitative research. Various elements of good practice in relation to qualitative management research were identified (and sometimes disputed) including flexible research design; epistemologically coherent analysis; reflexivity concerning process and product of research; and a persuasive, engaging presentation.

Assessment of the quality of qualitative research appeared to be more of an intuitive decision-making process than the application of known and agreed criteria. This is an interesting finding given that some qualitative researchers have tried to generate 'alternative'

checklists of criteria for assessors to use. An additional finding related to the increased pressures faced by academic researchers on a daily basis. Current research practice was seen to be deeply affected by pressures within the academic context including audit processes such as the Research Assessment Exercise, and career needs. Such pressures may work against the adoption of qualitative research techniques by management researchers more generally.

### **Assessment of the need for training provision for qualitative research**

The provision of training for qualitative research it was generally seen as scarce and of poor quality. There was a view that researchers needed to be aware of the complexity associated with conducting qualitative research, and the wide variety of techniques available. More specific training needs included: 'technical' skills, such as data analysis techniques and writing up qualitative research appropriately; knowledge of underlying philosophical issues behind qualitative research, and the varieties of approaches available to the researcher; reviewing skills; and skills in supervising qualitative research.

### **Training materials developed**

In response to the assessment of training needs we designed a series of nine training workshops to address the perceived deficits. The workshops are entitled

- Skills of the qualitative researcher;
- Philosophies that inform qualitative research;
- Reflexivity;
- Range of methods;
- Analysis;
- Writing up and publishing;
- Assessment criteria;

- Reviewing qualitative papers and research grants;
- Supervision for qualitative research.

The workshop materials were piloted at four different venues and the response to them was very positive. The workshops have been designed to be independent from each other in most cases. However, they could be taught consecutively as a full course on qualitative management research (e.g. on a postgraduate programme). Each workshop is supported by facilitator's notes (including ideas for pre-reading and further sources of information) and contains two or three exercises for the participants, which usually draw on the participants' own extant research work to simulate experiential learning. The workshops are modular in structure. This format was chosen so that facilitators could pick and choose between modules as a result of their assessment of the needs of their client group.

### **Resources available**

These training materials are freely available for others to use as part of a cascading process. All the materials are also available at the project website: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/bgpinqmr/> and further requests for CD-ROM versions can be made to the Principal Investigator at [catherine.cassell@mbs.ac.uk](mailto:catherine.cassell@mbs.ac.uk).

It is our intention that through the ongoing dissemination of the training materials, the project will have a long term impact on enhancing the quality of qualitative research in the business and management field.

**Further details are available from:**

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