

INTRODUCTION

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This method guide explores how Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) methods can be an effective tool in the evaluation process. In particular, this guide investigates how particular QL methods can be used alongside Quantitative Longitudinal (QNL) methods to provide evaluation evidence of the outcomes and impacts of a programme, policy or service. The guide presents a general overview of the different types of evaluations conducted and the advantages that implementing QL approaches can stimulate. The guide draws on the QL approach adopted on a four year longitudinal study to demonstrate how QL can add real value to the evaluation process. The guide also makes reference to other research methods that are used to complement QL research.

BACKGROUND

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Traditionally, evaluation studies are undertaken at distinct stages of a programme or policy life cycle (usually the middle and end). These retrospective evaluations can provide useful information about the

KEY POINTS

- Traditionally, evaluations have tended to provide a 'snapshot' of change, usually at the mid point or end of a programme, for example.
- There is, however, a growing recognition that QL methods can provide a rich seam of evidence to inform evaluation studies.
- In general, QL methods do not tend to be used in isolation on evaluation studies but are used alongside survey methodology.
- QL methods do not provide representative results (when looking at programme impact overall) but when allied to QNL methods can add significant value
- QL methods help researchers to understand 'how' and 'why' impact has been created when undertaking an evaluation. By comparison, QNL methods measure 'what' has happened.
- QL methods help understand how wider contextual factors (e.g. the recession) have impacted on programme delivery by looking at individual experiences.
- QL methods can inform programme delivery by providing 'real time' evidence of what is happening on the ground (e.g. through repeat case studies).
- QL methods are useful when looking to attribute change (e.g. where it is difficult to disentangle which programme has had an impact on participants).
- QL methods are useful when an evaluation needs to capture shorter and longer term outcomes, and where it is important to measure the progress of participants.

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Conducting Evaluation Research Using QL and QNL Methods

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impact of a programme or policy initiative. However, more often than not they only provide a 'snapshot' of change at one particular point in time. Retrospective evaluations also have limited potential with respect to informing programme delivery, due to them taking place when the intervention has finished. In our experience, the most useful and informative evaluations are those that have a longitudinal dimension to them, and which can measure change as and when it happens (i.e. they are prospective and run alongside the programme or policy intervention).

Prospective studies also hold a number of advantages over retrospective studies in that rather than asking participants to look back and comment on an issue (which potentially can be influenced by an individual's inability to recall events or the ordering of events) the researcher has a previous record of what was said by an individual that can be used as a basis for updating the evidence. Prospective studies also allow participants to reflect on and comment on changes or continuities that have taken place since the last interview (Malloy *et al*, 2002).

Typically more quantitative research methods, such as surveys and impact assessments are used to measure 'what' the impact of a programme or policy intervention has been. While this type of approach often provides 'robust' material to evidence change (particularly where quantitative methods are used longitudinally, i.e. a survey is repeated at strategic points in the delivery of a programme) it does have its limitations. When looking to unpick 'how' and 'why' a programme or policy has been effective, it is necessary to utilise other research methods. QL can add significant value to QNL research, in that it allows one to explore contexts, mechanisms and outcomes at the individual level.

Another key strength of QL methods is their ability to link the feelings and experiences of individuals to wider macro economic issues, such as the recession. In turn, this can be fed back into the evaluation in order to help understand how wider factors have affected programme delivery or target achievement. The excerpts from a participant's diary could, for example, show how a public service cut (e.g. back-to-work support) has impacted on their life, and therefore potentially on the achievement of wider programme targets (e.g. job outcomes). QL methods therefore provide the opportunity to feed evidence into an evaluation that a survey or one-off set of consultations might miss.

In addition to diaries, a range of other QL methods are widely used in longitudinal evaluation studies. Examples include cohort studies, where the participants of a pilot project are interviewed at strategic points to track change over time. Non participants of the pilot project may well also be tracked to explore whether outcomes vary in the

long run. In some cases, this information may well feed into economic impact or cost benefit analysis studies. QL case studies are also commonly used in evaluations. These involve interviewing project managers, frontline staff and participants in order to provide robust, triangulated research findings. The outputs from QL case studies are used in a variety of ways. They add flavour and depth to evaluation reports by providing individual examples of change and impact. More broadly, they also help contextualise QNL survey findings.



In summary, QL methods can be used to particular effect on evaluation studies where: the outcomes are potentially more difficult to measure through surveys (e.g. softer outcomes); where there are both shorter and longer term outcomes expected though the delivery of a programme (retrospective evaluation are more likely to miss out this material); and, where it is important to measure the 'distance travelled' of beneficiaries over time (Malloy *et al*, 2002).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PRACTICE

Over a four year period (2006-10) Ecorys undertook a longitudinal evaluation of the Big Lottery funded Reaching Communities programme. The programme provided grant support to community projects to achieve one or more of the following outcomes: to improve people's quality of life (e.g. through training); create stronger communities (e.g. by engaging residents to tackle problems); improve the physical environment; and, stimulate healthier and more active people and communities.

One of the big considerations in the evaluation was the fact that there was already a plethora of funding and programmes targeted at local communities with similar aims and objectives to Reaching Communities. This created several problems for the research team, most noticeably with respect to identifying and attributing change. It was therefore agreed that a longitudinal approach to the evaluation was best suited, including an annual web survey (sent to all projects funded). However, there was a recognition that other methods needed to be adopted to assess the impact and effectiveness of the programme and associated projects.

For this reason, the evaluation team chose to utilise a number of QL research methods alongside the web survey. The main approach adopted was to undertake longitudinal case studies of a sample of projects. Projects were revisited two to three times over the course of the evaluation. The research team interviewed project managers, delivery staff and beneficiaries in order to triangulate the evidence gathered. The idea behind undertaking the longitudinal case studies was not to provide results that were statistically representative, but rather to provide a detailed account of the main (short, medium and longer term) areas in which projects have been able to have an impact (over time) and the factors that have influenced this.

The research team felt that it was particularly important to maintain an element of comparability in the case studies by re-addressing the original questions with the consultees. However, there was also recognition that the aims and objectives of projects may have changed and evolved over time. Where this was the case the researchers probed the consultees to understand how the project had changed and why. This information was critical in helping to contextualise the evaluation findings from the programme overall, for example, in terms of identifying areas of greater (or lesser) impact.

QNL survey data was used to provide a headline measure of overall programme performance against anticipated outcomes. For example, one of the main findings from the QNL survey was that only 69% of projects managed to have a significant impact on reducing disadvantage and social exclusion (this was lower than for some other indicators tested). The survey data provided the research team with a headline finding but provided no evidence to understand why projects were finding it challenging to achieve this outcome. The QL case study visits were therefore integral in providing evidence to understand why projects had found the issue of social exclusion and disadvantage more challenging to address.

The LATCH project, which targets homeless people, was visited 3 times over the course of the evaluation. Successive visits to the project established that one of the original aims (to restore a derelict building using volunteers) was more difficult to address than originally anticipated. This was because of the (multiple) issues that participants faced, resulting in them needing more intensive support than was originally anticipated. Over the course of the project, the team placed a much greater emphasis on developing the skills needed by participants, by providing routes back into further education. A number of the other case studies also revealed that the anticipated outcomes were longer term in nature, and would be achieved post completion of the evaluation.

Within the programme, there was recognition that a longitudinal case study approach would not be appropriate for shorter term projects, whilst others would have found it

too burdensome to accommodate repeat case study visits. In these instances, the approach to exploring impact was limited to 'before and after', snapshot appraisals of change explored through consultations with project staff. Given these limitations, the research team adopted a participatory research approach to generate additional evidence to support the evaluation. This included training project staff in the basic principles of self-evaluation, so that they could feedback evidence to the research team on an ongoing basis. Evaluation toolkits (including questionnaires for project staff to use with participants) and a dedicated email helpline were created to support this process.

Ecorys have undertaken numerous other longitudinal evaluation studies. The following example is provided to demonstrate the role QL played in influencing national policy.

In 2003, Ecorys was commissioned to undertake a longitudinal study to inform the basic skills client outcome evaluation for the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). The research approach essentially involved face-to-face, longitudinal, qualitative interviews with clients. The research team tracked the progress of Jobcentre Plus clients over several months, assessing changes in client attitudes and experiences of work, as well as measuring the impact of the basic skills provision.

Over 500 interviews were undertaken with Jobcentre Plus clients, as part of a two stages research process. Stage one focused on understanding the characteristics of the study participants. Stage two explored changes since stage one (as well as the factors contributing to change), and the jobs, training and soft outcomes achieved. The study was timed to allow clients receiving skills training at stage one to potentially complete the training and secure an outcome by stage two.

Within the sample there was also a comparison group, including clients who chose not to access support, in order that any differences in outcomes could be explored. The longitudinal focus of the research enabled client's progress into sustained employment to be followed and meant that reasons for clients' non-participation and the impacts of this on progress into employment could be identified.

In addition, by pursuing a qualitative approach this allowed the research team to reveal that a policy conflict existed (i.e. the policy thrust of the national basic skills programme was at odds with Jobcentre Plus' aim to help clients into work). In practice, the study revealed that clients were confused by the fact they were being referred to basic skills training but were also being told to look for and take work if opportunities presented themselves. The research team then went on to make a series of recommendations based around this issue.

CONCLUSION

While QL clearly has many advantages as an approach to evaluating the impact and effectiveness of a programme over time, there are a number of factors that need to be considered when undertaking a study. These include the following:

- The process of conducting QL studies is time and therefore resource intensive. It is therefore vital that due consideration is given to the most appropriate methods for engaging with and sustaining the interest of individuals, groups and companies.
- A robust questionnaire that can be used over time with a minimum of changes (piloting the questionnaire, and making revisions) is integral.
- Consistency with respect to the interviewing techniques can also be important.
- One of the main challenges in undertaking a longitudinal study is maintaining a sample over time, and avoiding over burdening and/or fatiguing the participants.
- The success of the first contact and interview with the respondent can greatly influence their willingness to take part in the initial and subsequent waves of research.
- Data collection tends to be significant and often eclectic at the outset of the research because it is impossible to know what data might be significant over time.
- Having a clear vision for how the data will be used in the evaluation helps avoid over burdening the researcher team, while developing a framework provides a structure for organising and analysing the data.
- Continuity with respect to the research team and participants is important on shorter term longitudinal studies. However, on longer term studies refreshing the research team and participants can be beneficial, in terms of avoiding longer-term respondent effects (Malloy et al , 2002).
- It is worth exploring the potential for utilising participatory methods (i.e. where consultees are trained to conduct research themselves) as part of the design phase of the study. This can provide vital additional evidence to inform the evaluation.

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