

Guidance – Sample Size for Qualitative Research

The **purpose** of qualitative research methods is to look for meaning (i.e. to understand the why and how behind things). It is therefore about developing *richness* in data based on an in-depth understanding rather than *representativeness* which is the preserve of quantitative research methods.

The **sample** of people or situations required for qualitative research methods is therefore **small** in number (relative to the sample required for quantitative research methods) but includes the **widest range** of people or situations (rather than being representative).

The **approach** of qualitative research methods involves proceeding through the sample until what is emerging is not providing any new information. This is known as reaching **data saturation**, and where qualitative research methods are applied appropriately, a small but varied sample of people or situations will be sufficient to reach this point.

What does a **small sample size** mean in practice?

- **Interviews** - between below 10 to no more than 30 people
- **Focus Groups** - between 3 and 6 groups with around 4 to 8 people in each
- **Participatory Methods** - between 10 and 20 people
- **Observational Methods** – between 5 and 15 observational situations

The above figures are for **guidance only** – the nature of qualitative research means that there are no calculations per se and the numbers are influenced by **resources available** and when the **data saturation point** is reached (which crucially requires the widest range of people or situations forming the start of the sample as this is the quickest way to reach data saturation). The more complicated and complex a study is the greater the likely variation in key factors that inform the range of people or situations that need to form the sample.

Qualitative research methods are **flexible** and therefore the use of these methods should be adapted during their use to take into account emerging information. Therefore if for example a predefined number of interviews is not needed or it emerges another approach may be more helpful after several interviews the study should accommodate this. Similarly, questions being asked should also be adapted to the emerging information. Qualitative research methods are *reflective* and *inductive* rather than *deductive*.

Interpretation of qualitative research findings requires being analytical and not just descriptive (i.e. being able to code the data in ways that enable themes and the like to emerge). It also requires not thinking about or presenting the analysis in a vacuum.