



SURVEYS AND QUALITATIVE DATA

SUMMARY

Although by definition not really a ‘measurement’ of impact, qualitative data can be of great use in judging the effects of study support on participants. This guide looks at the ways in which quantitative data can be used and how to conduct effective surveys and interviews, which are two of the main techniques for obtaining it.

WHAT IS QUALITATIVE DATA?

Qualitative data is data that is not numerical but anecdotal (in a general sense). Numerical data is referred to as quantitative data. Qualitative data therefore cannot really be said to *measure* impact, because it doesn’t measure anything, but it can be a valid method for *assessing* impact. Qualitative data can be turned into quantitative data, but the numbers that result may not be very reliable.

For instance, suppose 30 pupils attending a drama course are asked what they have learnt during the course. This is qualitative evidence, but it might be possible to express it in a quantitative way ,e.g. 70% said in increased their self-esteem, 54% said it increased their confidence to perform, 37% said it developed specific dramatic skills. This is quantitative but none of the reported factors (self-esteem, confidence and skills) have actually been measured so the data is of limited reliability.

Case studies are a common form of qualitative evidence. These often involve small numbers or even individual pupils. They can provide very powerful evidence for the benefits of study support and are particularly to be encouraged when studying small groups (as numerical data is less reliable if the sample size is small). They can provide detailed evidence of precise outcomes and it is reasonable to assume, unless the individual or group is very unusual in some way, that similar outcomes would occur with other pupils or groups.

Qualitative data can be very powerful and should not be overlooked when assessing impact. It cannot be presented as concisely or quickly as quantitative data and the audience targeted needs to be taken into account. If it is done objectively and carefully it can be a very useful alternative or adjunct to quantitative data, and can be particularly useful for internal assessment and planning.

SURVEYS AND QUESTIONNAIRES

Surveys and questionnaires are common ways of collecting qualitative data, and can also be used to generate qualitative data. They can be time consuming to produce and particularly to analyse (if a large sample is involved) and it is therefore vital that the questions to be asked are carefully constructed so as to ensure, as far as possible, that the coordinator receives the information intended and that this is as reliable as possible. Although questionnaires and surveys are often used to plan provision, they can also be effective tools for monitoring impact.

When planning a questionnaire, it is important that it has a clear and precise purpose, and that the questions are directed towards that purpose (e.g. What teaching methods do pupils find effective? Why do some pupils never attend study support? Do pupils who attend study support also go to more activities outside school?). A common fault in questionnaires is to spread questions too widely, acquiring sketchy knowledge of a number of things but no substantial picture of anything!

Comprehensive details on planning and constructing questionnaires is given in *Research Methods in Education* by Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (Routledge, 2007), but this guide gives some basic advice.

CONSTRUCTION OF QUESTIONNAIRES

The following are some points to bear in mind when designing questions for questionnaires:

- Is the question necessary? Does it relate to the purpose(s) of the questionnaire?
- Is the question clear, precise and unlikely to lead to misinterpretation?
- Is the question unbiased, so that it does not ‘lead’ to certain answers?
- Is the question suitable for a ‘checkbox’ type answer? This type of question can lead to easier analysis but cannot always cover every possible response.
- Is the question easy to understand and not too complex?
- Are most of the questions closed? Open ended questions can be very useful because they allow a free response, but too many in any given questionnaire can make analysis difficult or impossible.

Examples of questionnaire pitfalls											
“Do you think the course has helped to make you more confident?”	This is a leading question, and implies that increased confidence is ‘expected’. It would be better to ask questions where the response given would be an indicator of confidence.										
‘Do you attend study support clubs regularly?’	This question is vague. What does ‘regularly’ mean?										
‘Do you enjoy out of hours clubs?’	When using this type of question, it is best to avoid ‘extremes’ like ‘always’ and ‘never’. Most people will avoid the extreme categories.										
<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px 5px;">Always</td> <td style="padding: 2px 5px;">Usually</td> <td style="padding: 2px 5px;">Sometimes</td> <td style="padding: 2px 5px;">Not usually</td> <td style="padding: 2px 5px;">Never</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="height: 20px;"></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Not usually	Never						Younger pupils, in particular, may not understand what a ‘follow-up’ activity is.
Always	Usually	Sometimes	Not usually	Never							
‘What sort of follow-up activity would you like us to put on?’	Example of a poor multiple-choice option. Most pupils like to do many or all of these activities, and their choice on any day will vary with circumstances.										
After school I like to A. Go home B. Play with my friends C. Go to an after school club D. Go to a non-school club or activity	The question is vague (what is ‘often’) and the negative framework (asking about NOT attending) often confuses the respondent.										
‘Do you find that you often cannot attend after school clubs?’	The question is vague (what is ‘often’) and the negative framework (asking about NOT attending) often confuses the respondent.										

SURVEY SAMPLES

The point of a survey is usually to get information from or about a large number of pupils, so they can take a long time to analyse. Choose a sample size that is big enough but not too big. If you want a picture of study support across the whole school, do not attempt to survey the whole population, but select a *representative* selection of each year group. Within a school, a sample size of 100 - 200 (provided the sample is not biased in any way) would normally be adequate. With targeted groups (e.g. Year 8, ethnic minorities, gifted and talented etc.), smaller samples may still be representative, and it may well be that the whole group can be surveyed, which would clearly be valid whatever the number.

If possible, try to get questionnaires filled in during supervised time (during clubs, in tutor lessons etc.). If pupils take the survey home, many will not return it and those that do may not be representative of the group as a whole.

QUALITATIVE CASE STUDIES

Qualitative case studies are usually done on one or more individuals or on a small group. The purpose of a case study is to study impact in depth rather than in breadth. Questionnaires may play a part, but the main techniques of the researcher will be observation and/or interviews. The interviews may be with pupils, their teachers and/or their parents.

The logic behind measuring impact in this way is as follows:

- This pupil or this group of pupils have benefited in certain ways by attending study support.
- The pupil/group are not totally unique or highly unusual.
- It is therefore reasonable to assume that (at least some) similar pupils undergoing the same experiences would benefit in similar ways.

The strength of good case studies is that there is little or no doubt about the benefits accrued, because of the depth of the study. Quantitative data from a large group can often be questioned regarding the benefits and whether they were produced by attending study support.

A potential hazard of this type of impact study lies with the choice of those involved. Sometimes, the subjects of case studies *are* unusual in some way. Many involve disaffected and low ability pupils, for instance, because in these groups there is 'room' for spectacular improvement. It is important that schools that have low numbers of such pupils do not think that study support is unnecessary in their context. It would also be unfortunate if the result was that recruitment for study support was targeted exclusively at such groups.

Such considerations are less likely to apply when the impact study is for internal consumption. The case is strengthened by avoiding pupils and groups that are at least reasonably representative of the general population. Case studies of groups are more convincing than those on single individuals.

INTERVIEWING PUPILS

Interviews are very useful, if time-consuming, ways of getting information about the impact of study support activities on individuals and groups. Although in some cases individual interviews are appropriate, it is normally best to interview two or three pupils at a time. The pupils are less likely to feel 'intimidated' by the situation, and they can often be stimulated by what another has said, adding to or clarifying the information. The downside of this is that some pupils may simply agree with their friends as a path of least resistance, particularly if one member of the interview group has a very strong personality. Skilled interviewers can usually get around this.

It is useful to have a 'hypothesis', or something specific that you wish to find out, before starting the interview, and it is important to ensure that focus is maintained, unless a diversion seems particularly interesting or potentially fruitful.

Although there is a place for closed questions, open-ended questions will often provide more information, some of which may be surprising for the interviewer. Pupils may find it difficult to express themselves clearly in such situations and supplementary, closed questions may be necessary.

It is important that an accurate record of the interview is kept. Notes are usually only adequate for short, closed question interviews. Voice recording is better but cannot pick up body language and visual expression. Video is ideal in many ways but there are permission issues and it can occasionally lead to 'performance for the camera'.

Interviewing Guidelines

- Interviews should be friendly and informal.
- Avoid phrasing questions like an interrogation.
- Do not put words into pupils' mouths by suggestive questioning.
- Ask for clarification if necessary but try to avoid suggesting your own clarification or interpretation of the answer.
- Make eye contact (with sensitivity to different cultural norms).
- Show that you are listening.
- Ensure everyone in a group can make a contribution.
- Give pupils time to think.
- Don't comment on answers in a way that suggests they are 'wrong'.
- Don't interrupt.
- Where appropriate, summarise (but don't interpret) what the pupil has said.
- Do not give your own views.
- Make sure that you talk less than the pupil.
- Encourage the pupil throughout the interview and give feedback.
- Have an informal seating arrangement.
- Ensure that you maintain focus on the things you want to know.

CONCLUSION

Never underestimate the value of qualitative evidence in assessing impact of study support. It sits alongside quantitative measurement in giving a full picture of outcomes. It can sometimes be converted into pseudo-quantitative data if there is enough of it (e.g. by recording numbers of pupils that gave a certain response) but there can be a danger of creating a 'measurement' from something that was not truly measured in the first place and so reliability is often questionable. Its strength is often that it offers insights into the experiences of pupils and the effects on them that quantitative data cannot.