

SUMMARY

KCE PROCESS NOTE: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS



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■ SUMMARY

1 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AT KCE

KCE's mission is to provide policymakers with scientific, evidence-based recommendations on questions relating to healthcare. It is expected to propose the best possible solutions for an accessible, high-quality healthcare system with due regard for growing demand and budgetary constraints. Like other independent publicly-funded research centres, KCE focuses on research with concrete applications rather than on theoretical considerations. In line with this focus, its approach to qualitative research is mostly pragmatic and realist, aiming to collect data that is sufficient to address the research questions in combination with other methods and sources.

In the context of KCE research, qualitative methods can provide a deeper, more concrete understanding of the topic under investigation than purely quantitative data, as well as valuable insights regarding its wider context. Their aim is not just to describe, but also to obtain more meaningful explanations of a phenomenon. They can also be useful in generating hypotheses. Qualitative research methods are particularly valuable in research on the organisation of healthcare (known as Health Services Research or HSR), but they can also be used in other types of projects like Health Technology Assessments (HTA) or the development of Good Clinical Practice guidelines (GCP).

2 WHY THIS UPDATE?

The first KCE process note on qualitative research methods (QRM) was issued in 2012, as part of a collection of methodological guidance documents aiming to help in-house experts and subcontractors deliver high-quality research based on the best evidence available. It addressed the nature and usefulness of qualitative research and qualitative findings, but also the crucial issue of their quality and validity as evidence.

Thirteen years later, the importance of QRM in the field of health sciences in general has considerably increased, as has the underlying methodological basis. At KCE, well-designed and well-conducted qualitative research is now commonly used in synergy with other data collection methods and sources, thereby contributing to the excellence of KCE research and to recommendations that are tailored to the reality of the field. In 2018, a Qualitative Research Team was also created within KCE to expand internal expertise on qualitative research, reflect on methodological choices and offer support to internal experts who choose to use these methods in their projects. Over time, new approaches were tested for the purpose of specific research projects, like e.g. the secondary analysis of existing qualitative data or developing skills to interview persons with specific needs or vulnerabilities (e.g. persons with intellectual disabilities, psychiatric patients, etc.).

The world too has changed over the last decade, not least because of the profound impact of COVID-19 and the spectacular boost it gave to remote and online solutions. This evolution inevitably influenced qualitative research on a practical level, with remote or hybrid meetings or interviews becoming commonplace, but also, more fundamentally, with the increasing use of online data collection techniques. At KCE, COVID-19 also triggered an in-depth reflection on expedited research and reporting (ESRO), the qualitative component of which poses specific challenges.

For all these reasons, the time had come to revise, improve and develop the original process note to include recent evolutions and new experiences, and provide KCE researchers with up-to-date methodological guidance on qualitative research methods.

3 WHAT THIS PROCESS NOTE IS AND AIMS TO ACHIEVE...

In a nutshell, this report aims to provide hands-on advice and criteria for the use of QRM in KCE studies, and to broaden the knowledge base about QRM within KCE. It contains some theoretical knowledge on QRM, advice for putting them in practice and (answers to) frequently asked questions to guide decision-making, as well as links to numerous more specific procedures, templates and other resources.

It can be of use to all KCE experts and to many partners outside the organisation, regardless of their level of training and familiarity with QRM, though persons with different profiles will use it for different purposes:

- KCE experts who are already trained in QRM: to help them make appropriate methodological decisions, and to justify these decisions to their team and/or their validators.
- KCE experts with no previous training in QRM: as an information source about QRM, to help them draft a preliminary version of a research protocol (and decide whether they need an expert in QRM on their team), or to help them understand a research proposal or discussions related to QRM during a project.
- Subcontractors and validators: to help them understand how, why and which QRM are used in the context of KCE research (when submitting a proposal or validating a scientific report).

4 ... AND WHAT IT IS/DOES NOT

However, it is important to stress that this process note is an information and guidance document, not a “how to” manual for those with no or little prior knowledge or experience of QRM. In other words, it can e.g. help decide whether qualitative data collection is going to be useful or possible for a given project, or identify the QRM method best suited to a specific purpose, but it does not replace specific training in these methods. Contacting the Qualitative Research Team (QRT) as soon as possible is always a must when starting a research project involving QRM.

Moreover, while it is extensive and attempts to cover both straightforward and less common or more complex approaches, this process note is by no means exhaustive, restrictive or final. At KCE and beyond, the possibility to think “out of the box” and design novel or customised methods will always be essential both to feed innovation and to promote researcher’s professional well-being. The process note itself will therefore remain a work in progress, subject to regular updates.



COLOPHON

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Reported interests KCE members:	KCE is a federal institution funded by INAMI/RIZIV, by the Federal Public Service of Health, Food chain Safety and Environment, and by the Federal Public Service of Social Security. KCE’s mission is to advise policymakers on decisions relating to health care and health insurance on the basis of scientific and objective research. It is expected to identify and shed light on the best possible solutions, in the context of an accessible, high-quality health care system with due regard for growing demand and budgetary constraints. KCE has no interest in companies (commercial or non-commercial, i.e. hospitals and universities), associations (e.g. professional associations, unions), individuals or organisations (e.g. lobby groups) that could be positively or negatively affected (financially or in any other way) by the implementation of the recommendations. All experts involved in the writing of the report or the peer-review process completed a declaration of interest form. Information on potential conflicts of interest is published in the colophon of this report. All members of the KCE Expert Team make yearly declarations of interest and further details of these are available upon request.
Reported interests:	All experts and stakeholders consulted within this report were selected because of their involvement in the topic of <title>. Therefore, by definition, each of them might have a certain degree of conflict of interest to the main topic of this report’
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Disclaimer:	• This report describes a methodological guidance for qualitative research on health-related topics. Although it is in first instance intended for KCE projects, its applicability extends beyond these. Its broader use and referencing are encouraged. • This report does not contain policy recommendations that require approval by the Board of KCE. It has been reviewed by Belgian experts but has not followed the formal validation procedure by independent academic experts. The report will be updated regularly based on progressive insights. • Only the KCE is responsible for errors or omissions that could persist.
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