

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS: A COMPARISON BETWEEN FOCUS-GROUP AND IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW

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Qualitative research methods tend to be used more and more in academic research. The cost for these methods is quite low and the results may be very interesting and useful for many fields of study. However, the utility and the characteristic of qualitative research methods differ from subject to subject and from discipline to discipline. This paper comes close to a comparison of two qualitative research methods (focus-group and in-depth interview) used in investigating the opinion of academics, analyzing by comparison the results founded in a research conducted in the Bucharest University of Economics using focus group and in-depth interviews. The conclusions of the study reveal that apart of the limits states in the literature, there are other elements that can contribute to obtaining unrealistic results.

Key words: Qualitative research methods, focus group, in-depth interview, academic research

Introduction

Rapid social change and the diversity of the world have contributed on a large scale to the diversification of research methods. Limits of quantitative research methods have determined orientation to the qualitative instruments which are more reliable in certain circumstances. There are many virtues of qualitative research that determine a lot of researchers to manifest preference for these kinds of methods: are the correct choice of appropriate methods and theories, the recognition and analysis of different perspectives, the researchers' reflections on their research as part of the process of knowledge production, and the variety of approaches and methods (Flick, 2002:4). Qualitative research explain how it may be useful for exploring "why" rather "how many".

There are various types of instruments used to collect data for qualitative research. Focus groups and in-depth interviews are among the most utilize instruments that researchers are using in collecting their data.

Focus group implies a group discussion in order to identify perceptions, thoughts and impressions of a selected group of people regarding a specific topic of investigations (Kairuz, Crump and O'Brien, 2007). Discussion should be perceived by the participants as no-threatening and free to express any kind of opinion, no matter if this opinion is shared or not by the other participants. Focus groups generate valuable information, especially when the participants represent small groups of interest, ignored by the quantitative research or when the area of investigation.

The in-depth interview is a technique designed to elicit a vivid picture of the participant's perspective on the research topic. During in-depth interviews, the person being interviewed is considered the expert and the interviewer is considered the student. The researcher's interviewing techniques are motivated by the desire to learn everything the participant can share about the research topic.

In depth interview is an effective qualitative method for getting people to talk about their personal feelings, opinions, and experiences. It is also an opportunity to gain insight into how people interpret and order the world. We can accomplish this by being attentive to the causal explanations.

The results obtained through these two qualitative methods varied (among others) according to the subject investigated. As a general rule, in depth interviews, the participants are more confident, more relaxed and they feel more encouraged to express the deepest thoughts about a certain subject. In focus group the

participants act according to their personality; it is the risk that in some situation those with a weak personality to follow those with a stronger personality. There are also some situations when the issue discussed is incommode and the participants are not confident in expressing their real opinions. They are more preoccupied by the image that the other participants will build up on them that to express what they really think about that subject.

The case study

This study tries to identify the limits of using focus group comparing with in-depth interview in identifying the opinions of academics regarding some aspects of academic research. The aspects evaluated through these two qualitative methods were related to the connection between academic research and business environment and to the performance of the academic research.

Both issues are quite very important for Romanian academics and universities management. The performance of academic research (through the results of the research process) is perceived as almost similar with the performance of the university.

Cooperation between academic research and business environment is considered to be one of the proofs that academic research is in the benefit of society, a confirmation of the market utility of universities. Academic research is considered to be efficient and social valuable if it offers solution to real problems that companies confront on. Students seem that are not willing to sacrifice functional expertise in favor of generalist expertise. (Schelfhault and Crittenden, 2005)

From universities point of view, collaboration between business environment and universities is an important source of casuistic for the teaching process. It is also an important source of financial resources for universities, and many times sponsorship activity is determined by the implication of business environment in the academic activity. There are cases when industries developed in a perfect harmony with universities (Silicon Valley).

From the students' point of view, those universities with strong connection in business environment are very attractive. It is a proof of the fact that they will have better opportunities to find a job and a confirmation that higher education does not offer only theoretical knowledge, but also practical skills and abilities.

In Romania it is still believed that universities are more oriented to theoretical approach than to practical direction. Universities considered that business environment does not have positive reception for academic research. Business environment is not convinced that universities have necessary abilities to find correct answers for their problems.

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to present the differences between focus group and in depth interview using these qualitative methods on a subject regarding the academics' evaluation of the performance of academic research and the relation between business environment and academic research. Both focus group and in-depth interviews were conducted in the same university, following the same conversation guide. Some of the academics interviewed by in depth interview method were present in the focus group. The structure of focus group was similar with that of in-depth interviews. Academics were grouped in three categories, according to age and involvement in research. Group A, below 30, group B between 30 and 50 (with two sub-groups, B1 with little involvement in research and B2 with involvement in research) and group C, over 50 (also with 2 sub-groups: C1, with little involvement in research and C2 with involvement in research).

The structure of the conversation guide was around three major themes: *what do you consider about the present evaluation system of academic research, why the performance of academic research in Romania is considered to be low and how do you appreciate the relation between academic research and business environment*. In order to discuss the comparison between these two qualitative methods were selected two questions: the first one, *what do you consider about the present evaluation system of academic research*, and the last one, *how do you appreciate the relation between academic research and business environment*. The reason of selecting these two questions is given by the fact that the first two question offer similar information from this paper's goal point of view.

Also, literature review was used in order to determine the place of this study among other researches. At the international level it is a constant preoccupation in analyzing both the virtues and the limits of focus

group and in-depth interview and some of these studies were consulted in order to sustain the conclusions of the present paper.

Major findings

What do you consider about the present evaluation system of academic research?

On this question, the answers gained in focus group and in in-depth interview were quite different. If both in-depth interviews and focus group all of the participants complained about the present evaluation system, the motives of complains were different.

The participants' attitude in focus group was rather favorable to the research aspects. Nobody mentioned in the focus group pecuniary aspects. All critics expressed by the participants in focus group were related to the relativity of the criteria established by the Ministry "why they are asking for publication in ISI journals, when we don't have such journals in Romania" (X12), to the high pressure that exist on the professors "students are asking for a good professor, evaluation system asks for a good researcher. It is quite difficult to be good on both" (X3, X9, X11). All participants in focus groups agreed that publication should be a criterion of evaluation, but not in this way. A lot of vague aspects were revealed, as "originality of the research", or "the contribution to the field", criteria which are difficult to evaluate and nobody explained what it mean.

In in-depth interviews the critics were very acid. The attitude against research activity was evident. "When I was hired, nobody told me that I supposed to be a researcher. I was thinking that I will be a professor" (X9, X6). "Which is the difference between research institute and universities? We should educate people, not to research" (X12, X10). Financial aspects were also among those reasons invoke the most. "They should first look to our wages and then they should ask us to have similar performances as the western academics" (X2, X7, X5).

The differences between the attitude expressed in focus group and in in-depth interviews have different reasons. One reason is given to the fact that all academics acknowledge that research is an important part of the academic activity and they don't want to admit "in public" that they do not agree with it. The complaints are related to the way of establishing criteria not with the criteria. In in-dept interview, they felt more confident and they expressed their concerning and their rejection regarding an activity which is considered too difficult or unnecessary (for some) from their point of view.

Another reason is given by the differences between generations. Those over 50 are more reserved than those under 30. But those over 50 have more official authority, so they abstain to express negative opinion in order to preserve their image.

How do you appreciate the relation between academic research and business environment?

This issue is one on which focus group and in-depth interviews were convergent. Both in focus-group and in in-depth interviews a certain defensive attitude was revealed. The academics consider that business environment does not offer credit to academic research. "They are not interested in what can we offer. Managers are suspicious; they consider us a sort of spy (X1)". "If you know someone in a company, than you have chances to develop some relation with them, otherwise is almost impossible"(X2). "Let's be realistic. What can we offer? Why should they be interested in our researchers' abilities?" (X7) "They don't need research; they definitely don't need academic research"(X5).

Other opinions consider business environments hostile to collaboration with academic environment. "Our students have many difficulties in finding companies for internship and those which accept students ignore them and do not allowed students to be involved in their current job. "All the time, we receive the same answer from the students when we ask them: what have you done in the company? I answer to the phone; I typed something on computer, things like these....(X6)"

From in-depth interviews, many additional comments appeared in link with the relation between academic environment and business environment. Almost all of them were in the same spirit of malfunction relation, which has roots both in the communist regime mentality and in the perception that universities are mostly oriented towards theory, not towards practice. "In communism, the collaboration between so called 'business' and universities were compulsory and nobody could say no, therefore, it was a formal cooperation, especially in the economic field. Maybe for engineering it was different but for us, it was

totally formal, without any kind of practical results.”(X20,X24, X2) “Companies do not appreciate academic environment because they consider that universities offer only pure theory. Many students are working today and they are saying that what we are teaching them doesn’t apply in practice”(X31).

Why on this question the results were similar? Why the both methods lead to the same conclusion, that business environment is hostile and is not interested in the research that could be provided by academics?

One explanation states in the fact that the collaboration between business environment and academics is a difficult one. Every academics confronted with this difficult cooperation between universities and business environment, mostly through students’ internship activity. As one of the interviewed academics said, it is somehow frustrating to ask the students all the time the same question: “What have you gained from your internship and to receive the same answer over and over again: “Almost nothing because they didn’t allowed me to involve in their business”. It is a real situation given by the insufficient maturity of business environment, on one side, and the struggle of academics to prove their business utility on the other side. We have to accept that Romania is still learning market economy and all the actors are in the middle of a radical transformation process. Business environment in Romania, in general, gives no real attention to the research activity. Many things are done “per se”. Romanian companies are too poor and multinationals prefer to involve specialized companies in their researches, not academic environment. This is not a secret, and academics are aware of this aspect. Therefore, the same opinions are reflected by the focus-groups and in-depth interviews.

Another explanation could be offered by the question itself. Apart from the other two themes, this one is about “somebody else”. It is a subject that concerns all of us, but it involves another “entity”, an abstract one, “business environment”. In focus group nobody was worried that his/her opinion is misunderstood or that the expressed opinions will have any kind of negative consequences. Furthermore, as all of them expressed the same thoughts, there was no fear of a “bad” image perceived by the other participants.

Another motive could be given by the fact that the cooperation with business environment is not necessary assimilated with the personal academic performance. If an academic does not publish, this could be interpreted as a lack of skill or a low performance, but not being involved in cooperation with business environment could be the results of many external factors, which does not necessary should be related with personal abilities or personal performance.

Conclusions

The use of qualitative research methods is considered to be a solution in investigating “Why?” especially when the need to generalize the results is not necessary. Qualitative research methods are also preferable when the investigation is oriented to determine motivation, perceptions or believes.

Focus-group and in-depth interview are among the most used methods. There are some advantages offered by these instruments: low costs and valuable information, which are difficult to obtain from a quantitative research.

The inconvenient of these methods are determined by their limits in generalization the results. Also the results can be altered if the instruments are used in an improper manner. This case study shows that interviews are also especially appropriate for addressing sensitive topics that people might be reluctant to discuss in a group. The question regarding the present evaluation system of academic research was a sensitive one and the results demonstrated that on question like this in-depth interviews are more indicated. On the second question the results were similar using both methods because the subject discussed was suitable for a group discussion too.

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