



# Quality standards for case studies in the European Foundation

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**Research project:** Quality Standards for Case Studies in the European Foundation

# Introduction

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions researches, analyses and monitors trends in the living and working environment on a European comparative basis. It has developed a number of ‘monitoring tools’, such as surveys and thematic comparative observatories. Complementing these monitoring tools, it undertakes research that examines practical experience, under the heading ‘exploring what works’. A particular emphasis is put on the workplace level. This is placed into a research cycle whereby a triangulation of methodologies can be combined to study different aspects of a phenomenon, from both quantitative and qualitative aspects.

Since the Foundation was created almost 30 years ago, it has carried out research projects with different purposes and different methodologies. The case study has from the beginning been one of the methods of enquiry used. Case study research in the Foundation has taken many different forms and purposes, reflecting the evolution of the Foundation itself and its aims as a research institution providing information and advice to policymakers in the European Union.

For all its research, whatever the methodology used, the Foundation has always endeavoured to ensure that it follows the highest quality standards. With regard to its survey methodology, a quality insurance framework has been established with a view to following the highest standards throughout the whole procedure as well as to check the data quality.

In the same line, the Foundation intended to review its methodology for cross-national case study research and commissioned Analytica Social and Economic Research in 2006 to carry out this study on ‘Quality Standards for Case Studies in the European Foundation’.

The primary aim of the project was to develop a unified methodological approach for case study research in the Foundation based on a set of agreed guidelines for carrying out cross-national case study research.

As part of this study, the project team carried out

- A literature review on case study methodology
- A detailed analysis of existing case study reports by the Foundation
- Interviews with:
  - selected representatives of the Foundation’s staff
  - researchers with experience in carrying out organisational case studies for the Foundation
  - legal experts in data protection and intellectual property issues
  - policy stakeholders and other users of the Foundation’s research
- A brainstorming workshop with Foundation staff.

The first part of this report summarises the results of this research. The second part presents the quality standards themselves.

It should be noted that one of the conclusions of the research was that there is no single ‘one size fits all’ model of an organisational case study that meets all the Foundation’s needs. A threefold typology was developed to cover the main types of case study corresponding to three different phases in a typical research cycle. These three types are: exploratory, explanatory and example case studies. The guidelines are differentiated in order to take account of the specific requirements of each type.

# Overview of case study research

## What is a case study?

The case study occupies an important place in research on work, organisations and public policy. However, case studies are carried out for a range of different purposes by people from very different disciplinary perspectives and there is little agreement on what a case study is, or should be.

At one extreme, there is the business school approach, made famous by the Harvard Business School (HBS) and copied across the world in innumerable MBA course curricula, which uses the case study as a teaching resource. At HBS, the case study forms the main basis of teaching with each student typically studying 20–30 cases in depth, of which approximately a third are new cases introduced that year (Rothenberg, 2005). The pedagogic purpose of such case studies draws attention to the role of managers and seeks to identify good practice from the perspective of the particular organisation.

At another extreme there is the organisational case study used by ethnographers as a setting for research into a range of social and cultural issues which may have little direct relevance for the day-to-day business of a company although they may shed fascinating light on various aspects of human behaviour.

In between lies a diverse range of types of case study, carried out from different perspectives, addressing different research questions of interest to a variety of different scientific and policy audiences and carried out at different levels of depth. In many Member States, there is a long tradition of case study research in the study of work, employment and policy analysis.

In this field, many research questions require qualitative research methods and, in particular, case studies on individual workplaces, organisations or policy initiatives. This is true for a wide variety of topics, such as changes in work organisation, equality of opportunity, use of skills and knowledge, implementation of technology, decision-making or bargaining processes, and a large body of work has been built up across Europe over recent years resulting from case study investigations in these fields, often by institutions which have developed their own individual approaches. However, because of the diversity of approaches as well as the diversity of national research traditions, much of this work has had an ad hoc character, making it extremely difficult to draw on this material for purposes of comparison. Despite its adoption as an accepted method in many disciplines and its increasingly common use in European research projects, the case study *per se* is still very neglected in the literature on research methods and, where it is discussed, this is almost exclusively in the social science and social research methods literature.

Whilst many guides may be found to such questions as how to conduct an interview, how to design a questionnaire, how to select a sample, how to conduct participatory observation, how to interpret data, how to organise a focus group discussion and so on, the case study *per se* is not discussed much, perhaps because it does not constitute a single method but rather a combination of different methods (see Denzin et al, 1994). They include: observations; secondary analysis of documents; interpretation of quantitative data; structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews; group discussions; and sometimes also quantitative surveys (e.g. of the employees, suppliers or customers of a case study firm). Some notable exceptions are Yin (1994), Stake (1995), Hamel et al. (1993), Feagin et al. (1991) and, most recently, Gerrin (2007), all of whom discuss the case study approach in some depth. There is a general agreement in this literature that the role of the researcher should be an interpretative one, i.e. it should involve putting together the viewpoints of multiple stakeholders in order to gain a rounded view (Feagin et al, 1991). However, within this general interpretative paradigm there is a wide range of methods for data collection and analysis which vary according to the theoretical-methodological orientation of the researchers – hermeneutics, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism etc. (see Strauss and Corbin 1990, Yin 1994, Morra and Friedländer 1998, Bryman and Burgess, 1999). These are partly embedded in differing national research traditions (e.g. the Anglo-Saxon, Nordic, French and German

traditions) in which methodological terms may have somewhat different meanings and research practices may vary. Different disciplines have their own approaches to methodology (e.g. the ethnographic ‘grounded theory’ approach, classic sociological approaches, and psychological approaches).

Robert Yin is one of the most influential writers on the case study method. He is one of the few authors promoting the case study as a scientific inquiry underpinned by principles of empirical research. The case study method is strongly associated with an interpretive tradition but can also be carried out in a ‘positivist’ manner with a higher emphasis on principles of science (Yin, 1984). Yin defines the case study method along three dimensions:

- it is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context;
- a case study should be used when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident;
- it is a method in which multiple sources of evidence are used.

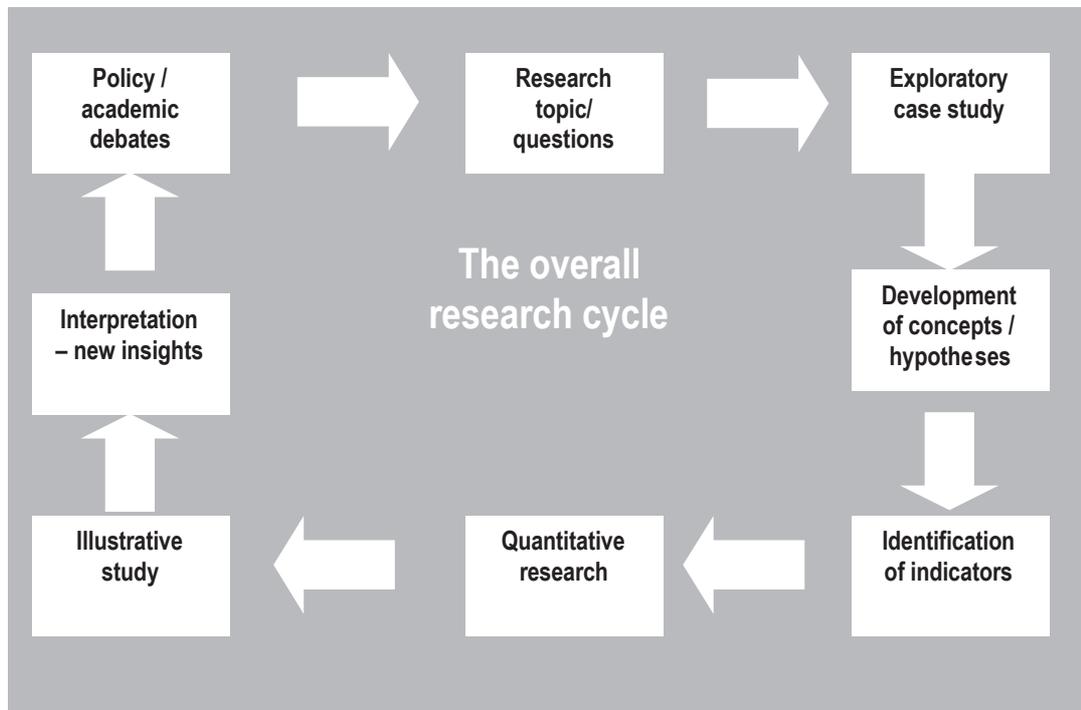
Rogers (1978) offers another view, making a distinction between ‘case studies’ and ‘case histories’. A case history is described as an event or series of events set in an organisational framework with or without a related environment. The events are described in some detail with the main and subsidiary points highlighted. In this view, a case study is also seen as describing events in a framework within an environment but differs from a case history by including a much stronger analytical dimension. Issues relevant for the content of the case study report emerge as the case material is subjected to analysis, thus producing deeper insights than are possible from a case history.

## The uses of case study research

Research makes use of case studies in two main ways: as illustrations and for the generation of concepts and hypotheses. Illustrations aim at explaining relatively complex and abstract matters with the help of concrete examples. This procedure builds on generalised findings gained elsewhere and illustrates them by means of individual examples. The other main use of case studies in qualitative research is for generating concepts and hypotheses. Here, the case study approach allows the researcher to approach a new field of research without much previously developed structure and to collect data in this particular field. These data can then be used to develop concepts and hypotheses. In addition to description and exploration, the use of case studies can be explanatory. Yin (1994, p.1) argues that ‘case studies are the preferred strategy when “how” and “why” questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real life context’.

Although the object of research is rather limited in terms of scope and timeframe, a considerable number of variables can be dealt with. It follows from this that the main value of much case study research results not so much from the research itself in isolation but in the success with which it can be combined with the results of other more quantitative research. The use of qualitative research to develop hypotheses and for illustration are not mutually exclusive but can rather be seen as occupying different places in a research cycle, as shown below in Figure 1, which charts the relationship between case studies and quantitative research.

Figure 1: *The relationship between case studies and quantitative research*



Source: *Analytica*, 2005

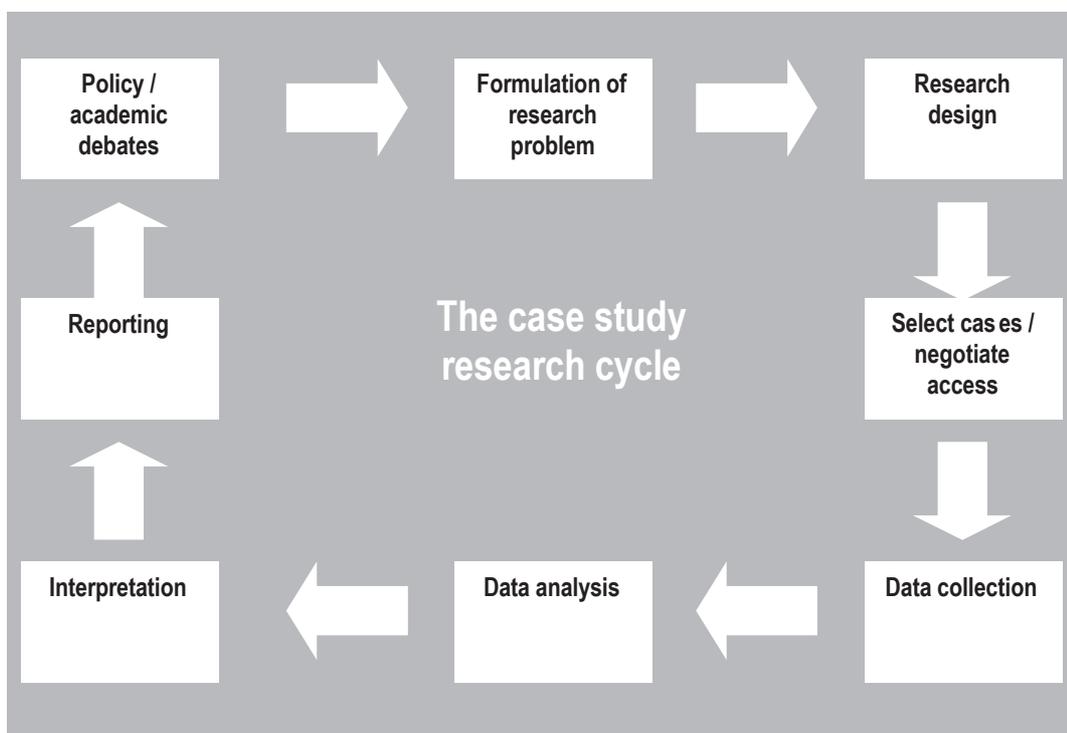
In this scheme, exploratory case studies are carried out in order to investigate newly identified phenomena and develop some initial concepts and hypotheses. These results can then be analysed in order to produce indicators which can be investigated further using quantitative methods, for instance by inserting questions into a survey or by analysing existing data sets that capture these indicators. This stage makes it possible to establish the extent and characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation and compare its distribution across different populations.

Having established these distribution patterns, it is then possible to select case studies whose typicality can be demonstrated. These illustrative case studies can then be used to investigate those features of the phenomenon which are not easy to determine from quantitative analysis (e.g. causality, qualitative implications etc). In practice, of course, the distinction between exploratory and illustrative case studies may not be so clear. The dynamic relationship between consolidation of past knowledge and generation of new knowledge is such that many researchers may be carrying out both processes simultaneously, using illustrative case studies to generate new concepts for the future as well as to provide further illumination on past research results.

Such a relationship between case study research and quantitative research implies that, whatever the attractions of ‘telling an interesting story’, a successful case study must be underpinned by some rigorous planning which ensures that the underlying research questions are clearly defined, the methodology and choice of research site are appropriate, the data collected are relevant for addressing these questions and the indicators identified are, wherever possible, capable of being triangulated with those in existing quantitative data sets or planned future surveys. Where comparative case studies are proposed, it is important that the research design should take account of both similarities and differences between countries, sectors and other variables in order to ensure clarity and common agreement between different research teams about which aspects of each case are to be compared. Some of the issues that arise in developing such a coherent underpinning are discussed in the next section.

Figure 1 presents the overall research cycle as it may be perceived from the perspective of the policymaker or research funder. There is, of course, a smaller research cycle which might be seen as a sub-loop of this which relates to each individual research component. Figure 2 presents this cycle for an individual case study.

Figure 2: *The research cycle of an individual case study*



Source: *Analytica*, 2005

This empirical cycle is essentially no different in case study research than in any other type of research (e.g. surveys or experiments). However, in case study research the stages tend to be overlapping and mutually reinforcing, with feedback loops between the different stages. For instance, the first stage of data collection may lead the researcher to redefine some of the original research questions, or the interpretation may suggest explanations which require the researcher to return to ask additional questions.

However, there are considerable risks involved in allowing individual researchers to ‘do their own thing’ in investigating a case study. Given the practical constraints of remaining within an agreed budget and timescale, this may result in too much data being collected in an unfocused and unsystematic manner which makes analysis and reporting extremely difficult. These problems are multiplied when several researchers are involved in carrying out separate case studies (especially, when these are being conducted in different countries in different languages). Without an overall disciplinary framework which insists on clarity about the research questions being addressed, consistency in method and agreement on the data to be collected, comparative analysis becomes impossible. There is a delicate balance to be struck between ensuring this comparability at an international level and remaining open to the possibility of encountering an unexpected finding and sensitive to the specific ways in which each case may be shaped by its local socio-economic and cultural context, or ‘local web of content’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The larger the number of case studies, the greater is the need for each stage in the empirical cycle to be specified formally and explicitly in advance.

In conclusion, it is not possible to design a ‘one size fits all’ ideal model of a case study; rather there is a need for standards and procedures that can be flexibly adapted to fit a range of different models of case study whose exact nature will be determined by the research questions addressed and the specific needs of research funders and scientific and policy stakeholders.

### Case study fitness for purpose

Although the case study method has become an accepted method in many disciplines and is increasingly used in European research projects, there is a considerable lack of literature not only on the case study method itself but also on its applicability. There have been a few attempts to classify types of case studies, however.

Yin (1993) makes a distinction between three key types – ‘exploratory’, ‘explanatory’, and ‘descriptive’.

Stake (1995) offers three further types: the ‘intrinsic case’, when the researcher has an interest in the case; the ‘instrumental case’, when the case is used to understand more than what is obvious to the observer; and the ‘collective case’, when a group of cases is studied.

Yin (1994) presents at least four applications for a case study model:

- to explain complex causal links in real-life interventions;
- to describe the real-life context in which the intervention has occurred;
- to describe the intervention itself;
- to explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear set of outcomes.

Under Yin’s classification system, exploratory cases are considered as an introduction to social research in areas where little is known about a certain topic. Explanatory case studies may be used for doing causal investigations. Descriptive cases require a descriptive theory to be developed before starting the project.

It is clear, however, that in practice there are enormous variations, both in the depth in which case studies are carried out and in the purposes to which they are put. In general, the most in-depth case studies are those that have been planned in accordance with principles of scientific research and good research practice. However, several further types of case studies can be found. Often the case study is used to illustrate a scenario or ‘tell a story’ descriptively without carrying out in-depth analysis of the scenario. These cases are often referred to as ‘illustrative’ cases. Illustrations aim at explaining relatively complex and abstract matters with the help of concrete examples. This procedure builds on generalised findings gained elsewhere and illustrates them by means of individual examples. The presentation of illustrative case varies. Most minimally, a presentation may be based on a singular account by one person or even solely based on some documentation gathered by a researcher without having actually sought direct contact with a case. Conducting case study research in this limited way often means that the quality and indeed the truthfulness of a case is difficult to judge by the users or audiences of case studies.

‘Better practice’ or ‘good practice’ cases serve a similar purpose but they may be even more limited in scope, detailing only a particular aspect of good practice as told from a singular viewpoint. Illustrative and better practice cases commonly lack criteria to judge their quality or representativeness and can vary immensely in detail and description, making them also sometimes difficult to assess in terms of their quality and truthfulness.

The case study method can be a particularly strong tool when used in conjunction with other research methods. For example, embedding survey research within a case study or a case study within a survey design might produce better quality research than using one of these methods in isolation. Rather few meta-studies of research projects have been carried out to investigate systematically the ways in which case study research is carried out. One exception is a review of research approaches in Information Systems research conducted by Mingers (2003). This study found that there is considerable confusion about the use and appropriateness of the case study method. Of the papers evaluated, 80% contained some form of empirical research, where surveys, interviews, experiments, and case studies were the dominant approaches. There was little consistency among the authors about how case study methodology was used and described. For instance, different words were used for the same research methods with the terms ‘case study’ and ‘interviews’ often used synonymously despite great methodological differences between these two methods. Another interesting observation emerging from this review was that the case study method was exclusively employed to study the organisational implementation of technology, while surveys were used to study a broader range of different contexts. For example, surveys were used to study technology adoption within the context of technology users, household and online consumers, senior executives, and small firms.

Using the case study method in conjunction with other methods requires an understanding of the principles of triangulation. Snow and Anderson (cited in Feagin, Orum and Sjorberg, 1991) propose that triangulation can occur with data, investigators, theories, and even methodologies. Other authors also refer to the concept of triangulation in the context of the development of the protocols that are used to ensure accuracy and alternative explanations (Stake, 1995). The need for triangulation arises from the scientific and ethical need to confirm the validity of the research processes. It can also be used as a basis for generalising from the results. One way of ensuring a high degree of validity in case study research is using multiple sources of data.

Four types of triangulation are described by Denzin (1984): data source triangulation, when the researcher looks for the data to remain the same in different contexts; investigator triangulation, when several investigators examine the same phenomenon; theory triangulation, when investigators with different viewpoints interpret the same results; and methodological triangulation, when one approach is followed by another, in order to increase confidence in the interpretation.

The literature also suggests that there is some confusion about what the case study can and cannot do. Flyvbjerg (2004) collects together a number of criticisms that are commonly made about the case study method (described as ‘five common misunderstandings’) and addresses them one by one, thus offering a revised paradigm which is useful to clarify the strengths and weaknesses of the case study method as scientific enquiry. Flyvbjerg’s arguments are summarised here in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Responses to some criticisms of the case study method

Common criticisms of the case study method	Flyvbjerg's responses to these criticisms
General theoretic al ( context -independent) knowledge is more valuable than concrete, practical (context-dependent) knowledge.	Predictive theories and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs. Concrete, context -dependent knowledge is therefore more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universal laws.
One cannot generalise on the basis of an individual case; therefore , the case study cannot contribute to scientific development.	One can often generalise on the basis of a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalisations as supplement or alternative to other methods. But formal generalisation is overvalued as a source for scientific development, whereas the force of example is underestimated.
The case study is most useful for generating hypotheses: that is , in the first stage of the research process, while other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building.	The case study is useful both for generalising and testing of hypotheses but is not limited to these research activities alone.
The case study contains a bias towards verification: that is, a tendency to confirm the researcher's preconceived notions.	The case study contains no greater bias towards verification of the researcher's preconceived notions than other methods of inquiry. On the contrary, experience indicates that the case study contains a greater bias toward falsification of preconceived notions than verification.
It is often difficult to summarise and deve lop general propositions and theories on the basis of specific case studies.	It is correct that summarising case studies is often difficult, especially as concerns case process. It is less correct as regards to case outcomes. The problems encountered in su mmarising case studies are due more often to the properties of the reality studied than to the case study as a research method. Often it is not desirable to summarise and generalise case studies. Good studies should be read as narratives in their entirety.

Source: adapted from Flyvbjerg (2004) by Analytica, 2006

Yin (2003) also refers to several common misconceptions regarding the use of the case study method compared with other methods such as interviews and surveys. According to Yin, the decision whether or not to use the case study method should be guided by the type of research question(s) asked, arguing that in general the case study method is appropriate for a range of situations where ‘ how’ or ‘ why ‘ questions are being addressed.

The issue of generalisation has appeared in the literature with regularity. It is a frequent criticism of case study research that the results are not widely applicable in real life. Critics of the case study method believe that the study of a small number of cases can offer no grounds for establishing the reliability or generality of findings. Others feel that the intense exposure to study of the case may bias the findings. Some dismiss case study research as useful only as an exploratory tool.

Yin responds to such criticism by pointing to the difference between analytic generalisation and statistical generalisation: ‘in analytic generalisation, previously developed theory is used as a template against which to compare the empirical results of the case study’ (Yin, 1984). The inappropriate manner of generalising assumes that some sample of cases has been drawn from a larger universe of cases. Thus, incorrect terminology such as ‘small sample’ may arise, as though a single-case study were a single respondent.

Stake (1995) argues for an alternative approach centred on a more intuitive, empirically-grounded generalisation. He terms this ‘naturalistic’ generalisation. His argument is based on the harmonious relationship between the reader’s experiences and the case study itself. The expectation is that the data generated by case studies will often resonate experientially with a broad cross section of readers, thereby facilitating a greater understanding of the phenomenon.

There is a general agreement in the literature that the role of the researcher should be an interpretative one, i.e. it should involve putting together the viewpoints of multiple stakeholders in order to gain a rounded view (Feagin et al, 1991). Perhaps the largest challenge in case study research is the handling of details from the viewpoint of the different participants. Considering realities from multiple perspectives (Stake, 1995) and having the task of integrating potential tensions between these perspectives makes major demands on the researcher. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that case studies commonly draw on multiple sources of data which also need to be integrated into the analysis in a systematic way. This means that case study researchers need to possess a wide range of competences: they have to be familiar with the topic under investigation and skilled in a variety of methodologies, in particular, in qualitative and quantitative approaches, interviewing skills, survey research, documentary research and data analysis skills. They also need the personal skills necessary to approach organisations and persuade them to open their doors to them and co-operate with the research process.

Despite the importance of triangulating the results of case study research with other research results, including quantitative ones, it is important to emphasise that case study research is essentially a qualitative method, distinguished from quantitative research by four distinct features:

- **Holistic**, i.e. its development is seen as an interconnected process with many different dimensions. A key focus of investigation is not on the different dimensions in isolation (e.g. separating managerial and trade union strategies regarding outsourcing of services), but understanding the interlinkages and tensions between them. Quantitative methods tend to separate and simplify indicators and impact processes in order to measure them, whereas qualitative methods seek to understand the complexity as a more accurate reflection of reality. The case study presents a bridge between these two assumptions and holds the potential to integrate these two elements.
- **Based on recognition of multiple realities**, where reality is seen as inherently subjective. The focus is on understanding different perceptions, aspirations and interests and how these influence accounts of ‘facts’ and events rather than attempting to reduce them to a single version of reality. Different stakeholders may have different perceptions of power relations within organisations. Qualitative methods treat these differences as interesting in themselves, as indicators of relative power and as possible explanatory factors in differential impacts of development interventions. Using a case study approach means that these potential tensions can be put in direct contact with findings from quantitative (seen as more explanatory) sources.
- **Heuristic, interpretative, inductive and iterative**, i.e. qualitative research is evolving rather than restricting itself exclusively to predetermined questions or hypotheses. An assessment starts with an intensive familiarisation with the context, institutions and policies to be assessed and progressively builds up a comprehensive understanding of the processes involved. Because of the emphasis on understanding complexity, the scope and focus of the research are continually redefined as the researcher’s understanding of different parts of the process increases and new issues arise. Quantitative research is often conducted in a more linear fashion, i.e. based on the testing of a specific hypothesis. In qualitative research, this process is often more flexible; research questions may be revised throughout the study and more data may need to be collected to achieve a state of saturation in line with Grounded Theory (Glassner and Strauss, 1990) whereby data is collected until no new information can be found. The case study method presents an opportunity to combine the strengths and weaknesses of both of these approaches and can develop a base of evidence where findings are more directly related to each other rather than being presented separately, trying to answer different sets of research questions.

- **Requires in-depth face-to-face field work.** Because of the need to interrelate all these different dimensions to accumulate an understanding of a particular context, limits are placed on the division of labour that it is possible to achieve without compromising the quality of the results. The need to relate the parts to the whole in an interactive and developing way makes it more difficult to delegate or divide up different parts of the investigation between different people than in quantitative research where the questions are much more cut-and-dried. Skilled qualitative researchers typically spend long periods in the field rather than delegating field research and questionnaires to less-skilled enumerators. This does not, of course, preclude the possibility (indeed, in the case of international comparative research, the inevitability) of close collaboration with other locally based researchers or the use of more junior research assistants to collect some more clearly defined information.

However, it is important to note that a case study investigation records what is happening rather than seeking to influence events. Although recording individual accounts may aim to empower people and influence policy through making them more visible, there is no attempt to integrate qualitative research with empowerment and policy development (as might be the case, for instance, in ‘action research’). Ensuring that the researcher is ‘distanced’ in this way from the case contributes to making the data more reliable by minimising the liability of respondents to manipulate information in the expectation of beneficial outcomes or fear of unwanted consequences.

# Issues in case study research

Carrying out case study research internationally presents a number of challenges to researchers, some of which are summarised below. In relation to many of these issues there is no universal single ideal solution. However there is a need for the actors involved in research design to be aware of these issues and to make clear choices in the light of an evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages in relation to particular research questions and institutional priorities and goals.

## The unit of study

The unit of analysis is a critical factor in case study research. Typically, the object of the research is a system of action rather than an individual or group of individuals. Case studies tend to be selective, focusing on one or two issues that are fundamental to understanding the system being examined. The unit of analysis needs to be clearly defined because any discrepancy will impact on other steps in the conduct of the study. A clear specification of the unit of analysis also provides internal validity as theories are developed and data collection and analysis test those theories. External validity is more difficult to attain in a single case study. External validity could be achieved from theoretical relationships, and from these generalisations could be made. It is the development of a formal case study protocol that provides the reliability that is required of all research.

In organisational case studies, the unit of study is particularly problematic. The notion underlying the classic business case study assumes the 'firm' to be the unit to be investigated. However, a number of accelerating global trends make this unit increasingly unstable and hard to define. These include the disaggregation of large firms into smaller cost or profit centres, the growth in outsourcing of both production and service functions, including many previously regarded as 'core' functions, the growing importance of 'brands' which may serve to tie together disparate businesses which are both legally and organisationally independent of each other, the development of 'virtual organisations', and the development of a variety of forms of franchising, licensing, dealership, partnerships (including public-private partnerships) and strategic alliances between companies.

This means that the 'firm' is no longer necessarily a stable entity or the most interesting object of study. Increasingly, the most significant changes in work, employment and organisation take place in what might be seen as the spaces between companies, shifting the focus towards networks, labour market intermediaries (Benner, 2002) or the value chain (Huws, 2005). Some of the most interesting case studies do not focus so much on a particular firm as on a relationship, for instance an outsourcing relationship between a company and a supplier, a relocation of work from one country to another, or the relationship between a parent company and a new business start-up which has emerged from an internal restructuring process.

Even when a decision has been made to focus on two or more organisations in this way, it is still necessary to further decide whether to focus on the 'enterprise' (the legal entity, which may be spread over several sites) or the 'establishment' (the geographical entity, which may house more than one enterprise). Within this, depending on the research questions to be addressed, it may be necessary to focus on a particular branch, department or function.

Difficult questions may also have to be addressed about the extent to which other external players (e.g. consultants, local training agencies, science parks, government departments etc.) should also be studied in any given case. This is particularly problematic in the case of comparative international studies: actors that play an important shaping role in one regional context may be marginal or non-existent in another.

## **Scale**

Case studies vary enormously in scale. They may involve large teams combining a range of quantitative and qualitative methods, or be based simply on a couple of interviews. It is generally agreed that in order to qualify as a case study (as opposed to a simple interview), several different viewpoints should be collected, in order to enable the researcher to gain some critical perspective on the case and to provide the basis for an interpretative analysis. However, the question still commonly arises: how many people to interview? The answer will of course depend partly on the research questions to be addressed, the size of the organisation (or the number of organisations) involved and the resources available. The aim should be to gain as many different perspectives as possible, covering at least all the main groups of stakeholders. How these stakeholders are to be defined should be explicitly addressed in the research design to bring all aspects of the case into visibility. For instance, a failure to interview any women, or any workers in a particular occupational group, or any representative of senior management, might serve to conceal an important dimension of the subject under study. There are, however, some cases, for instance a failed business start-up, where it is unlikely that there will be more than one or two informants and it is important that any guidelines should be sufficiently flexible to take account of such situations.

## **Identification of suitable cases and negotiation of access**

A perennial problem in case study research is that of choice and access. It is a burden on companies to allow researchers onto their premises and take up the time of staff in providing information. They are therefore unlikely to open their doors without some good reason. Such reasons vary: it is possible that the research question that is being investigated is of intrinsic interest to the company; that there is a desire to learn from the results of the study as an input to ongoing or planned change processes; that there is a desire to benchmark their practices against those of other organisations; that there is a sense of obligation to participate in publicly funded research if they have participated in some initiative of that public funder, or that they wish to show off some good practices as part of their public relations strategy.

On the side of the researcher, there is a temptation to investigate organisations with which they already have a relationship, or which have a reputation for openness. There are several risks here: that the case will not be typical, that certain companies are over-studied and that access is conditional or biased and the researcher is told only the 'good news' (or, in some cases, only the 'bad news'). The choice of informants to whom the researcher has access will generally be influenced by the point of access to the company, for instance whether it is via senior management, a public relations department, a personal contact with a particular manager or a trade union.

Attempts to find typical or representative cases by means of random approaches to companies are time-consuming and frustrating because of the high refusal rate, but in some instances, especially in relation to illustrative or explanatory (as opposed to exploratory) case studies, this may be the 'least bad option'.

Because of the 'interpretative' nature of case study research, systematic selection or sampling of a case or set of cases may be viewed as a secondary point of interest. Nevertheless, there still needs to be a rationale for the selection of cases and the process should be done in a systematic manner so that the case can be judged for its quality.

## **Selection of cases**

Generally, before a researcher proceeds with the selection of cases, it should be clarified whether a single or multiple case design is planned.

Single cases may be used to confirm or challenge a theory, or to represent a unique or extreme case (Yin, 1994). Single case studies are also useful for exploratory cases where an observer may have access to a phenomenon that was

previously inaccessible. These studies can be holistic or embedded, the latter occurring when the same case study involves more than one unit of analysis.

Multiple-case studies follow a replication logic. This is not to be confused with sampling logic, where a selection is made from a defined population for inclusion in the study. This type of sample selection is not appropriate for a case study. Each individual case study should consist of a ‘whole’ study, in which facts are gathered from a variety of sources and conclusions drawn on the basis of those facts.

When selecting a ‘critical case’, the case should be representative of a presumably large class of cases that fits the requirements of the theory or theories to be tested (Markus, 1989). Patton (1990) talks about ‘typicality’ within the same context of selecting critical cases. The larger the number of case studies, the greater is the need for each stage in the empirical cycle to be specified formally and explicitly in advance.

Roche (1999) has developed a typology of case study sampling methods which is summarised in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Roche’s typology of case study sampling methods and their uses

Types of case selection	Usefulness
<i>Unusual, extreme, or deviant cases</i> (programme dropouts, failures, or successes)	Useful in understanding puzzling cases which seem to break the rules, and why certain people or organisations seem to achieve particularly good or bad results. Useful in understanding the reasons for exceptionally good or bad performance.
<i>Typical or average cases</i>	Useful in understanding the situation of most people, communities, and organisations. Findings may be replicable in other ‘normal’ situations.
<i>Homogenous or similar cases</i>	Useful in looking at particular sub-groups in depth, which may be important when many different types of people or activities are involved.
<i>Varied or heterogeneous cases</i> (deliberately seeking out different organisations, or types of programmes)	Useful in exploring common or distinct patterns across great variance. Common patterns in such cases are likely to indicate core and central impacts of wider relevance, precisely because they occur across diverse groups.
<i>Critical cases</i> (may have wider relevance; can be used for broader purposes, such as innovative work or work with new groups or may produce results which have high political impact)	Useful when a single case study can dramatically make a point; statements such as ‘if it happens here it can happen anywhere’ or ‘if it doesn’t work here it won’t work anywhere’ indicate that a case is critical.
<i>Snowballing cases</i> (the researcher starts with a few cases and then selects others on the basis of the findings)	Useful when the information to select all case studies is not available or is dependent on a greater understanding of the situation.
<i>Convenience cases</i> (where case studies are chosen solely because access is easy – the information already exists, the site is very close, and so on)	Generally a bad idea if these are the only or most important reasons for choosing case studies.

Source: Roche 1999, adapted from Patton (1990) by Analytica, 2006

## **Case study protocol design**

In order to ensure high quality fieldwork, Yin (1994) emphasises the importance of the development of a case study protocol. Whilst this is useful even in the case of a single case study it becomes absolutely essential where a number of different case studies are to be compared because clear criteria for comparing the cases must be in place. According to Yin (1994), the protocol should include at least the following sections:

- an overview of the case study project – this will include project objectives, case study issues, and presentations relating to the topic under study;
- field procedures – reminders about procedures, credentials for access to data sources, location of those sources;
- case study questions – the questions that the investigator must keep in mind during data collection;
- a guide for the case study report – the outline and format for the report.

The structure imposed on the researcher by the protocol is important to ensure the overall progress and reliability of the study. It helps keep the researcher's focus on the main tasks and goals, while the process of developing the protocol brings out problems that would otherwise only be faced during the actual investigation. The overview of the project is a useful way to communicate with the investigators, whilst the field procedures are indispensable during data collection.

The guide for the case study report is often omitted from case study plans, since researchers often view the reporting phase as being far in the future. Yin (1994) proposes that the report be planned at the start. Case studies do not have a widely accepted reporting format; hence the experience of the researcher or research team is a key factor. Some researchers have used a journal format (Feagin, Orum, Sjoberg, 1991) which was suitable for their work, but not necessarily for other studies.

A common argument for the absence of a fixed reporting format is that each case study is unique. The data collection, research questions and indeed the unit of analysis cannot be placed into a fixed template. However, clarity in the structure of a case report will help immensely when carrying out the interpretation and analysis of multiple case studies as it will ease comparison across cases and will produce more standardised findings.

When carrying out multiple case studies with the aim of comparison, a case study protocol is absolutely essential as it will guide a more systematic analysis whereby case study reports can be analysed across cases. Where case studies are to be carried out in different national or regional settings it is important that inputs to the protocol are made from experts with a knowledge of each national or regional context and that briefings are carried out thoughtfully and with sensitivity to different cultural and institutional contexts. Importantly, the case study protocol needs to be developed in a participatory fashion, involving all key team researchers. Imposing the implementation of a case study protocol without advance consultation and agreement increases the risk that findings and reporting from cases will be inconsistent and lacking in depth and this will make it difficult to compare cases systematically.

## **Data collection preparation**

Because case study research generates a large amount of data from multiple sources, systematic sorting of the data is important to prevent the researcher from becoming overwhelmed by the sheer weight of information and to prevent the researcher from losing sight of the original research purpose and questions. Advance preparation assists in handling and documenting large amounts of data in a systematic fashion. Researchers may prepare databases to assist with categorising, sorting, storing, and retrieving data for analysis or import data sources into a software package for analysis.

## Data collection in the field

It is important that researchers collect and store multiple sources of evidence comprehensively and systematically, in formats that can be referenced and sorted so that converging lines of inquiry and patterns can be uncovered. Researchers carefully observe the object of the case study and identify causal factors associated with the observed phenomenon. Revisiting the initial research questions and subsequent revisions of research strategy may be necessary as the study progresses. Case study research is flexible, but when changes are made, they need to be documented systematically.

For the wider context of a single or a set of cases, Yin proposes six primary sources of evidence for comprehensive case study research. The use of each of these might require different skills from the researcher. Not all sources are essential in every case study, but the importance of multiple sources of data to the reliability of the study is well established (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). The six sources are:

- documentation;
- archival records;
- interviews;
- direct observation;
- participant observation;
- physical artefacts.

Yin's analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of these types of evidence is summarised in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Yin's analysis of the strengths and weakness of evidence types

Source of Evidence	Strengths	Weaknesses
Documentation	stable – repeated review unobtrusive – exists prior to case study exact – names, dates etc. broad coverage – extended time span	retrievability – difficult biased selectivity reporting bias – reflects author bias access – may be blocked
Archival Records	same as above precise and quantitative	same as above privacy might inhibit access
Interviews	targeted – focus on case study topic insightful – provide perceived causal inferences	bias due to poor questions response bias incomplete recollection reflexivity – interviewee may express what interviewer wants to hear
Direct Observation	reality – covers events in real time contextual – covers event context	time consuming selectivity – might miss facts reflexivity – observer's presence might cause change cost – observers need time
Participant Observation	same as above insight into interpersonal behaviour	same as above bias due to investigator's actions and preconceptions
Physical Artefacts	insight into cultural features insight into technical operations	selectivity availability

Source: Yin (1994), adapted by Analytica, 2006

Interviews are one of the most important sources of case study information. The interview could take one of several forms: open-ended, focused, semi-structured or structured. In an open-ended interview, the researcher could ask for the informant's opinion on events or facts. This can serve to corroborate previously gathered data. In a focused interview, the respondent is interviewed for only a short time, and the questions asked might come from the case study protocol. The structured interview is particularly useful in studies of neighbourhoods or large workplaces where a formal survey is required. The use of tape recorders during the interviews is left to the discretion of the parties involved but is increasingly standard practice in most institutes that carry out case studies. It is particularly important where several different investigators are involved and the interpretation may not be carried out by the person who conducted the interview.

Direct observation in a case study occurs when the investigator makes a site visit to gather data. The observations could be formal or casual activities, but the reliability of the observation is a crucial concern. Using multiple observers is one way to guard against the problem of unreliable observation.

Participant observation is a unique mode of observation in which the researcher may actually participate in the events being studied. This technique is used frequently in anthropological studies and can sometimes be used in studies of neighbourhoods or organisations. Apart from being very time and resource intensive, the main concern with this method is the potential bias of the researcher as an active participant. While the information may not be available in any other way, this drawback should be considered carefully.

Archives, documents and physical artefacts encompass a variety of evidence that might be gathered during a site visit. This might include advertising materials, annual reports, handbooks and quality standards, organisational charts, staff awards, promotional brochures, organisational spending budgets, etc.

It should be noted that no single source has a complete advantage over the others; as a rule of thumb a case study should use as many sources as are relevant to the study. If there is a cross-national team of researchers involved in the study, the collection of the same sources at each site should be aimed for as far as possible. In some cases, national differences may make it difficult to obtain the same range of sources. If this is so, this needs to be a point of discussion to establish the impact on the overall research outcomes, resulting possibly in the adoption of an alternative strategy.

The researcher examines raw data, using many interpretations in order to find linkages between the unit of analysis and the outcomes with reference to the original research questions. Throughout the evaluation and analysis process, the researcher remains open to new opportunities and insights. The case study method, with its use of multiple data collection methods and analysis techniques, provides researchers with opportunities to triangulate data in order to strengthen the research findings and conclusions.

In some instances, short, repeat interviews or other aspects of data collection may be necessary to gather additional information to verify key observations or check a fact.

Another technique, the cross-case search for patterns, prevents investigators from reaching premature conclusions by requiring that investigators look at the data in many different ways. Cross-case analysis divides the data by type across all cases investigated. One researcher then examines the data of that type thoroughly. When a pattern from one data type is corroborated by the evidence from another, the finding is stronger. When evidence conflicts, deeper probing of the differences is necessary to identify the cause or source of conflict. In all cases, the researcher should treat the evidence fairly to produce analytical conclusions answering the original 'how' and 'why' research questions.

## Analysis, interpretation and reporting

The analysis of case studies is one of the least developed aspects of case study methodology. The researcher needs to rely on experience and the literature to present the evidence in a variety of ways, using a range of different interpretations. This becomes necessary because statistical analysis is not necessarily used in all case studies. Some case studies employ a series of statistical tests to help in the presentation of the data to the reader. However, not all case studies lend themselves to statistical analysis. Miles and Huberman (1984) have suggested alternative techniques of analysis in such situations, such as using arrays to display the data, creating displays, tabulating the frequency of events, ordering the information, and other methods. This must be done in a way that will not bias the results.

According to Yin (1994), 'data analysis consists of examining, categorising, tabulating, or otherwise recombining the evidence to address the initial propositions of a study'. Yin suggests that every investigation should have a general analytic strategy, so as to guide the decision regarding what will be analysed and for what reason. He presents some possible analytical techniques: pattern-matching, explanation-building, and time-series analysis. In general, the analysis will rely on the theoretical propositions that led to the case study. If theoretical propositions are not present (e.g. in exploratory case studies) then the researcher could consider developing a descriptive framework around which the case study is organised.

Yin (1994) suggests three principles of data collection for case studies:

- use multiple sources of data;
- create a case study database;
- maintain a chain of evidence.

The rationale for using multiple sources of data is the triangulation of evidence. Triangulation increases the reliability of the data and the process of gathering it. In the context of data collection, triangulation serves to corroborate the data gathered from other sources. The cost of using multiple sources and the investigator's ability to carry out the task should be taken into account prior to deciding on the use of this technique.

The data that are collected during this phase need to be organised and documented just as they are in experimental studies. The two types of databases that might be required are the data (including interview transcripts) and the reports of the investigators. The design of the databases should be such that other researchers are able to use the material based on the descriptions contained in the documentation, subject to the satisfaction of data protection requirements. All types of relevant documents can and, in Yin's view, should be added to the database, as well as tabular materials, narratives, and other notes.

In recommending that a chain of evidence be maintained, Yin (1994) provides an avenue for the researcher to increase the reliability of the study. This procedure involves using an external observer to follow the derivation of evidence from the initial research questions right through to the ultimate case study conclusions. Initial case study reports should have citations to the case study database where the actual evidence is to be found. The standards appropriate for the presentation of academic case study reports are not always appropriate for other audiences, however and, whilst it is important for the purposes of scientific integrity that researchers follow good practice in the documentation of their work (and that these are available for inspection by research funders or evaluators if the need arises), when the results are intended for policy or other non-academic stakeholders, a more concise and readable form of presentation should be aimed for.

The final report will present the conclusions and recommendations for a single case or multiple cases. The goal of the written report is to portray a complex problem in a way that conveys an explicit experience to the reader. Case studies should present data in a publicly accessible way that can encourage readers to apply the experience in their own real-life situations. Researchers should pay particular attention to displaying sufficient evidence to gain the reader's confidence that all avenues have been explored, clearly communicating the parameters of the case, and giving special attention to conflicting propositions.

Techniques for composing the report can include handling each case as a separate chapter or treating the case as a chronological narrative. Some researchers report the case study as a story. Where a large number of case studies are being analysed comparatively, there is generally a two-stage process. In stage one, individual case study reports are written by national investigators using a common structure. In the second phase, it is more common to structure the material thematically, or by grouping the cases according to important variables (such as sector, size, country and so on). During the report preparation process, researchers critically examine the document looking for ways in which the report is incomplete. Where space is short it can be useful to include case matrices or other case summaries to provide readers with an overview.

For quality assurance, the researcher can use external reviewers (peer researchers or key informants) to review and comment on the draft document. Based on the comments, the researcher rewrites and makes revisions.

It is also essential that the final report includes a section on methodology which provides information on the funding and aims of the research, when and where it was carried out, what methods were used, the techniques used for data analysis and a discussion of any problems that arose during the fieldwork or in the process of analysis. This will create a greater level of transparency for the end user and reassure the audience that the cases indeed present valid information and the study has an analytical element.

The reporting and dissemination aspect of a case study is perhaps most important from the user perspective. It is the contact point between the user and the researcher. A well designed research project that is not well explained to the reader cannot be put to effective use.

The length of the report will not only vary according to the intended audience but also depending on the type of case study, i.e. whether it is in-depth or illustrative. An in-depth case study needs to be very detailed. Case reports should include: a section on the objectives of the study; details of the methodology, highlighting potential problems; a data analysis section integrating multiple stakeholder accounts; interpretation; and conclusions. The report may also make practical recommendations and should be targeted to the needs of the end user group.

A big question is whether to use technical jargon or to adopt a more accessible style of writing, helping the user to understand the implications of the findings. This aspect can be included in the briefing of case study researchers and should be discussed between the funders of the research and the researcher(s). In some cases, it may be useful to publish the research in more than one form: a concise and readable form designed for a non-specialist audience and a longer, more technical form for a scientific audience.

### **Anonymity and confidentiality of data**

Related to the problems of access are issues of anonymity and confidentiality. Naming an organisation raises a risk of breaching personal confidentiality and inhibiting respondents from supplying negative or commercially-sensitive information. However, anonymisation also brings its problems: it is almost impossible to conceal the identities of very large companies which are national or market leaders without eliminating so much specific detail that the report suffers

from over-generalisation and is difficult to learn from. Anonymisation may also detract from the exemplary value of a case. Other businesses may be unwilling to take seriously a case whose identity is unknown. In addition, the value which can be added at the dissemination stage by a first-hand presentation from one of the original actors is lost. Nevertheless, the requirement to gain insights from all possible perspectives does make anonymity preferable in 'deep' or explanatory case studies. As a rule of thumb, it is generally best therefore to aim for anonymity in such cases, but to name organisations in the presentation of 'example' or 'best practice' case studies.

## **Capturing the longitudinal dimension**

A case study is inevitably a snapshot of an organisation at a particular moment in time. The permanence of any arrangements which are noted and the long-term implications of any changes are therefore invisible. There is a need to explore ways in which a longitudinal dimension can be introduced to case study research without extending the fieldwork period to lengths which are unacceptable from the point of view of costs or the desire for timely information. One obvious and crucial safeguard is to ensure that there is a clear reference in any reporting of the study to the date(s) when the research was carried out.

## **Taking account of national differences**

The classic business school model of the case study tends to present a firm as an isolated entity, abstracted from its particular national and regional environment (and sometimes also from the specific historical context and global market situation). In reality, of course, any organisation is embedded in a particular institutional and cultural environment which shapes its practices in any given location (for instance a US company is likely to 'behave' very differently in France, with its specific legal structures and employment relations traditions, than it does in, say, Malaysia). This presents particular challenges to research involving comparative analysis of case studies carried out in different places (and even more so when they are also carried out at different times). If there are observable differences, should they be attributed to the particular company's practices, to general practices in that sector, to the particular stage in the business cycle or state of the world market, to factors specific to the national or regional context or to some other difference? The challenge here is to design research which can help to distinguish between these factors without becoming so all-embracing as to lose the specific focus on the individual case, and the underlying research questions.

## **Data analysis – the 'small n' problem**

Analysing the data from a single case study is a task that can normally be carried out by a single researcher, who has access to the transcripts of all the interviews, the possibility to check facts and considerable knowledge of the context. If all the interviews are conducted in the same language, it is possible to use a qualitative software package such as N6 or Ethnograph for a detailed analysis of the interview data. However, the moment a comparative dimension is introduced, and especially when more than one language is involved, new challenges are introduced. Faced with, for example, fifty case studies, no single researcher will be able to gain an intimate knowledge of the mass of raw data that went into producing them. The analysis will inevitably be carried out at a secondary level, by somebody working with material which has already been filtered once or more by other researchers. If the primary researchers have not been consistent in what they have noted, it is very difficult for this synthetic analysis to be carried out successfully.

In attempting to be systematic and efficient, there is an inevitable temptation to use quantitative methods, a temptation that increases with the number of case studies under review. However, (except in the unlikely event that random sampling has been used to identify the case studies) such an approach carries the risk of implying a representativeness that does not exist and, arguably, constitutes an illegitimate use of qualitative information. Some software packages have

been developed to cope with this ‘small n’<sup>1</sup> problem. However, these remain somewhat experimental and generally only work well when a small number of highly specified hypotheses are to be tested. In most cases, European projects with a large number of case studies to analyse are still using less automated (but highly labour-intensive) methods of analysis (Flecker, 2005). Further work is required to identify best practice in the analysis of large numbers of case studies.

### Ensuring clear understandings within an international team

In addition to taking account of national differences in the research design, it is also necessary to take account of them in the research process itself. This includes being sensitive to cultural differences and ensuring that concepts and terminology are clearly understood by all team members (Mante-Meijer and Haddon, 2002, Hill, 2004) and that common standards are applied. In particular, there may be a need to spell out the definitions of terms which have different legal or institutional constructions in different national contexts (e.g. ‘works council’ or ‘parasubordinate employment status’) and to ensure that all the research team have a common understanding of the concepts used (e.g. ‘offshoring’ or ‘delaying’).

There is also a need to avoid a situation where assumptions which make sense in the home country of a dominant lead partner are projected inappropriately onto different national contexts, for instance in developing countries (Jentsch, 2004). Cultural sensitivity is necessary for research involving ethnic minorities within the researcher’s own country as well as in relation to research carried out abroad. In order to ensure this common understanding, it is important to allocate time and resources in the research design phase to allow for inputs from all national parties, discussion within the team and, where necessary, training for researchers.

### Ensuring gender sensitivity

In recent years, women’s work has become a recognised topic in research on work and employment and research funders, including the European Commission, now make it a requirement that gender issues should be addressed in social and economic research. Nevertheless, the growing research on women and gender issues is to a large extent confined to the domain of women’s studies with only limited influence on the ‘main-male-stream’ of research. In this sense, the gender dimension has remained the concern of specialists and the normal practice of employment research has failed to take account of the insights from the large body of literature on feminist methods in social research (Reinharz, 1992; Harding, 1992).

Where researchers have taken account of gender issues they have often done so in somewhat simplistic ways, without taking account of the debates which have taken place within the field of gender studies about how gender relations are to be theorised, and how the complexities of the interaction of gender with other variables (such as class or ethnicity) are to be explained. Unlike many other academic fields, gender studies does not derive from a single discipline: concepts which may on the surface appear interchangeable (e.g. ‘sexism’, ‘gender-power system’, ‘masculinism’, ‘patriarchy’ or ‘gender role differentiation’) in fact derive from different disciplinary traditions and hence theoretical frameworks (e.g. anthropology, sociology, psychology, literary analysis) which can render their application in empirical research highly problematic. As a consequence there are continuing difficulties in making gender visible in research on work and employment although there is now an active debate on how to include a gender perspective in organisational case studies (Gunnarsson, 2003, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> i.e. small number (of cases)

In the framework of the WORKS project, Huws (2007) has developed some guidelines for addressing the gender dimension in organisational case studies which try to go beyond the limits of the ‘gender segregation’ concept. This approach has, since the late 1960s, underlain the most usual approach to researching gender in research using the comparative case study method (in common with other research methods, including surveys). It makes it possible to analyse the different positions of men and women within specific organisations and within the labour market more generally in relation to several different dimensions. Most usually these are defined as:

1. ‘horizontal segregation’ (whereby men and women are employed in different sectors and occupations);
2. ‘vertical segregation’ (whereby they are employed at different hierarchical levels);
3. ‘contractual segregation’ (whereby women may be more or less likely than men to be employed on certain kinds of contract, e.g. temporary or on-call contracts);
4. ‘temporal segregation’ (whereby men and women work different shifts, or are more/less likely to work part-time)

More recently, other forms of segregation have been added to this list, e.g.

5. ‘spatial segregation’ (whereby men or women may be more or less likely to be employed at city-centre/head offices as opposed to suburban or rural or remote back offices)

The concept of segregation can be further elaborated to take account, for instance, of ethnic differences, age differences, sexual orientation, differences in ability, skill or qualification levels etc. This approach has demonstrated its usefulness over many years, especially in the analysis of quantitative data. However, when applied to case study research its uses are limited. It is, of course, important to ensure that basic information is collected on the distribution of workers by gender according to the five dimensions listed above. However, this information alone cannot get one very far in understanding the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of this situation unless one can find informants who are prepared to discuss gender issues in the organisation in some depth and offer some insights – something which is by no means always the case. Because sex discrimination is outlawed throughout the EU, interviews with HR managers or line managers are highly unlikely to produce responses that admit to discriminatory practices and usually give the message that ‘there is no problem’. This provides the researcher with very little to interpret and leads to a situation in which, if gender is discussed at all in the case study analysis, it is at a level which is either very superficial or very general and adds little in-depth knowledge to any understanding of the dynamics of the structuring and restructuring of gender relations in the workplace.

Getting beyond the ‘head counting’ that underlies this ‘gender segregation’ approach involves seeing gender not as a fixed characteristic of individual human beings but as a relationship which is continuously being produced, challenged, reproduced and transformed by both men and women in an ongoing process which is shaped by a range of different factors many of which are in conflict, or at least tension, with each other. In other words gender is not so much ‘who you are’ but ‘what you do’ (Acker, 1992; Alvesson and Billing, 1997).

In order to operationalise this approach within the constraints of case study research, four different levels can be identified at which this process of ‘gendering’ may take place within an organisation. These are:

- **Identities.** This refers to how people see themselves, their roles and what is ideal or typical for their occupations and those of others. This can be researched by means of interviews with individuals.

- **Discourses.** This refers to the ways in which people are represented and referred to both formally (e.g. the ways in which jobs are portrayed in advertisements or described in job descriptions, or the dress codes that are in place) and informally (e.g. the kinds of jokes that are acceptable or the kinds of social activities which take place in connection with work). This can be researched through secondary analysis of documentation, direct observation and analysis of group interviews.
- **Practices.** This refers to what actually happens in terms of everyday behaviour, work processes etc. This can be researched by means of observations, interviews and analysis of materials such as staff handbooks, workflow diagrams, quality assurance protocols etc.
- **Institutions.** This refers to formal structures and procedures which may have an indirectly discriminatory effect, or the effect of channelling women and men into different positions in an organisation, a labour market or society as a whole. This can be researched at an organisational level by means of interviews or analysis of rulebooks and other documentation but may also involve investigation of broader institutional frameworks (e.g. school or college curricula and practices; enforcement of equal opportunities rules; or support for childcare) at a regional or national level, or conditions imposed by parent or client organisations (e.g. requirements for night working). This broader information can be obtained by means of interviews with expert informants or a literature review.

It should be recognised that these levels are mutually interacting and cannot always be distinguished clearly from each other. Nevertheless, an encouragement to researchers to collect, discuss and analyse information at each of these levels can be conducive to developing a deeper understanding of gender at the workplace.

## Risk management

Two crucial elements of case study research create particularly high levels of risk compared with other research methods.

The first of these is the strong dependence on the goodwill of external parties to permit access to their organisations and expose themselves and their associates to the critical scrutiny of researchers. Not only is it difficult to gain access in the first place; it is frequently the case that access may be withdrawn part-way through the research process. This could be for a variety of reasons: an unexpected organisational change, such as a merger or takeover; a change of personnel, such as the departure of a key informant through whom access has been obtained; a controversial event, such as an announcement of redundancies, a financial scandal, or a workplace accident, that makes the organisation particularly sensitive to media enquiries and provokes a 'closing of the doors'; an objection to the amount of employees' time taken up in giving interviews; or an adverse reaction to a request by the researcher to interview someone who is critical of current organisational policy.

The second feature of case study research that creates a high level of risk is the considerable dependence in this method on the personal qualities, skills, knowledge and interpretative abilities of the individual case study researcher. These skills cannot be transmitted overnight and are in rather short supply. If a researcher has to drop out of a project for some reason (e.g. because of ill health or a change of job) finding a replacement may be very difficult, a difficulty which is exacerbated if case study access has been negotiated through personal contacts. The dependence of the project coordinator on the personal attributes of the researcher on the ground in any given location can create challenges in terms of management and quality control, especially in cases where national institutes take on freelancers to carry out individual case studies, creating an additional step in the communications chain between the coordinator and the person conducting the research on the ground.

Furthermore, experienced case study researchers are generally used to working autonomously and are often fairly senior within their organisations. In addition, they may have developed highly individualistic ways of working, drawing on a

variety of different research traditions. It cannot therefore be taken for granted that a group of case study researchers with different national and institutional backgrounds will necessarily work well together as a team, and agree to a common approach, however rich their experience and however good their communication skills. There is thus also a risk of serious differences of opinion within an international team, making it difficult to arrive at a consensus in the interpretation of the evidence.

Whilst no project will be entirely risk-free, a number of steps can be taken to minimise these risks, some of which are summarised below.

### **Case study selection criteria**

In order to ensure comparability of the results, it is good practice to ensure that cases are selected on the basis of certain specified criteria, e.g. so that firms in similar sectors can be compared in different national settings. However, it is important to avoid making these criteria overly rigid. Especially in small countries, only one single company may be present in some sectors (e.g. automobile manufacture, steel production or aviation) and if this company refuses access it will then become impossible to find an appropriate case. It is common for researchers to have to approach ten or more companies to obtain successful access so it is clearly a good idea to ensure that there will be enough choice to give them scope to do this. Even so, there may be a need to adjust original expectations in the light of experience. It is best to start with an 'ideal' matrix of cases that are defined reasonably broadly, but to be prepared to alter this flexibly in the light of researchers' experiences in negotiating access. This implies an interactive process whereby the coordinator remains in close contact with national partners, adjusting the balance of cases on the basis of developments in the field. In some cases, this may involve giving priority in the selection of cases to less experienced researchers in smaller countries, relying on more experienced researchers to find matching cases in larger countries where there is greater choice. Negotiating such an arrangement within a team may, however, require some diplomacy on the part of the coordinator.

The negotiation of access is typically a time-consuming process and the risk of failure can be reduced by lengthening the period allowed for this wherever possible. Where there are significant timetable constraints, it can be useful to specify the case selection criteria in the tender specification phase, so that proposers can assemble teams on the basis of researchers who already have access to suitable cases, and this access can be used as one of the selection criteria for awarding a contract.

### **Involvement of all researchers in decision-making**

In order to ensure that all the researchers actually involved in case study fieldwork have a shared understanding of the research questions it is vital that they are fully involved in decision-making at all stages. Because of the crucial importance of the individual researcher, in case study research a failure of communication at an early stage can lead to disastrous (and expensive) failure later on.

In some other kinds of research it is normal practice for a senior person from each participating institute to attend project meetings and for the decisions made at these meetings to be passed down for implementation either to more junior employees of those institutes or to freelancers taken on for specific specialist tasks. In case study research such a model entails high risks: not only may key messages be inadvertently filtered out, but, even more importantly, the communication is effectively one-way, and opportunities for dialogue are missed. It is much better, though often more costly and time-consuming in the short term, to insist that all those who will actually be carrying out case study research attend briefing meetings and have a chance from the earliest stage to input their views about the feasibility of the case study selection criteria and the appropriateness of the questions, so that decisions are made with their active involvement.

This process will also help to cement the team and contribute towards a common understanding which will yield benefits in later stages of the research when the case study results are being analysed and interpreted.

### Feedback loops

As the literature makes clear, case study research is normally perceived as a method that should be carried out by a single person, because of the strongly iterative nature of the research process. When, as is inevitable in international projects, there is a division of labour between several different researchers, it is essential that mechanisms are in place to support this iterative process and replace internal thought processes by interpersonal dialogue. In practice, what this means is that, as well as ensuring a meaningful dialogue between the research coordinator and national partners at the early stages of the research, it is also important to ensure that feedback loops are in place in later stages of the research. Given the tight timescale of many international research projects, and the need to coordinate the work of a number of different partners, it is generally not feasible to put in place a continuous process of feedback (although this may constitute an ideal).

What is feasible, however, is to ensure that time is allowed in the schedule for a formal feedback phase after the initial fieldwork has been completed but before the interpretation of the results has been completed. In practice, this suggests a process that involves field researchers first submitting draft case study reports to the coordinator. In a second stage, the coordinator, having read these reports and compared them with each other and carried out some preliminary analysis, gets back to the field researchers with specific comments and queries, which may involve requiring the researcher to revisit informants with requests for additional information, or carry out further background research. On receiving this extra information, in the next stage, the coordinator completes a draft final report and this is then circulated to the national researchers for comment, so that they have a chance to check whether the research they have done has been correctly interpreted.

Such a strategy has several practical implications. First, it means that schedules have to be designed to allow time for such processes; second, it implies a need for considerable discipline in sticking to these schedules; and third, it implies that researchers have to remain available after the fieldwork has been completed. There are also implications for record-keeping and for contractual obligations which are discussed below.

### Record-keeping

The importance of retaining a trail of evidence as part of scientific good practice in case study research has already been noted. Accurate record-keeping also plays an important role in risk management.

In cases where there is a change of research personnel, the transition process is greatly eased if the first person has left accurate records of which people have been contacted at which organisations, their job positions and contact details and the results of any conversations that have taken place. It is also helpful to have a systematic record of any 'leads' which may not have been followed up yet, as well as notes of any documentary research that has been carried out, or copies of the results of internet searches or other background research.

Systematic records of interviews that have been carried out are also essential to enable repeat interviews to be carried out in case of additional queries that arise as a result of the feedback process described above.

Finally, if an extreme situation arises whereby the veracity of the researcher is in question, such records also make it possible for managers to carry out checks on their work.

It should be noted, however, that national data protection regulations should be followed in the storage and passing on of any records relating to personal information on individuals (see <http://www.respectproject.org> for further details of these).

### **Quality control**

In addition to ensuring that there is good communication within the team and that the work is done on time, there may remain some risks relating to the actual quality of the work itself. Some of these can be taken care of through the feedback loop mechanism, whereby researchers may be asked to return to the field to collect additional information or to clarify certain questions. However, there may be cases where additional measures are required to improve standards. If there are clear mechanisms in place to alert local project managers to the possibility of underachievement then it is possible that these can be addressed at once by assigning a more experienced researcher to work with one who is struggling or by providing extra managerial support at a national level.

If the problem is not apparent at the national level and only becomes visible when the draft case study reports fail to appear, or are judged by the coordinator to be of poor quality, then other measures may need to be adopted, ranging from mounting a rescue operation as outlined above to restarting the case from scratch with a different team. In order to devise an effective strategy it is necessary first to identify the source of weakness: whether the selection of the case was inappropriate in the first place; whether inadequate information was collected, whether there has been a failure to analyse it adequately, perhaps due to lack of understanding of the original research questions; whether there is a lack of report-writing or language skills; or whether there is simply a problem of translation.

In order to establish that a piece of work is indeed sub-standard, external peer reviewers play a useful role, either appointed by the funder or selected by the project coordinator.

What is clear is that issues of quality cannot be addressed effectively unless there are mechanisms in place to detect problems at an early stage and to deal with them effectively.

### **Contractual and financial issues**

In order to ensure an effective risk management strategy and procedural transparency, it is useful to include clauses in contracts (both between the funder and the project coordinator and between the coordinator and national partners) that spell out the quality control procedures and the steps to be followed in the event of a failure to meet quality standards.

Such clauses might include requirements related to record keeping, to the retention of research staff until the final report has been agreed, and to the procedures to be followed in relation to the submission and approval of reports. As a safeguard, it may be useful to withhold part of the payment for case studies until after this final approval has been confirmed. In the extreme event of a complete failure to deliver, this allows for the possibility of a reallocation of at least some of the budget to an alternative researcher.

### **Conclusion**

Because research is, by its very nature, an activity with an uncertain outcome, no research project is entirely risk-free. Case study research is, as noted above, in some respects more risk-prone than other forms and thus requires extra efforts. It does, however, also have certain advantages compared with some other forms of research. If a basic error is made in a large-scale quantitative survey, for instance, the entire exercise may be invalidated. In case study research, even if there is some variability in the standards of individual cases, some learning is still possible from the results, even when these are negative. Indeed, the very process of iteration on which so much emphasis is placed, may mean that the failure of some case studies can lead to improvements in the ways that others are carried out. In order for such learning to take place, however, it is crucial that there is good communications across the whole research team and that all its members have sufficient scientific humility to be open to the lessons that can be learned from their less fortunate colleagues.

# A typology for case studies within the Foundation

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions has carried out a large and impressive range of case studies over recent years. These vary considerably in depth, in scope and in presentation but nevertheless have certain features in common when compared with other types of organisational case studies.

First, because of the Foundation’s mission, they have a clear policy relevance. Whilst many of the subcontractors used have been leading academic experts in their fields, it could be said that the primary aim of the case studies is not that of ‘pure’ scholarly research but to inform policy. This has implications not only for the selection of the topics and the approach adopted but also for the presentation of the results. Both the printed reports and the case study presentations on the Foundation’s website are designed to be accessible and informative to policy stakeholders and to extract clear policy ‘lessons’ from the research.

Second, because of the Foundation’s Europe-wide scope of operations, the selection of cases is usually broad, covering most if not all Member States. This inevitably leads to large numbers of case studies which in turn restricts the scope for presenting any individual case in depth or for engaging in lengthy analysis.

Third, although there are some exceptions and variations, there is a typical pattern for the conduct of case study research. Most commonly, this is commissioned from a single contractor, with partners or subcontractors in different Member States. Again, with some exceptions (most notably the EMCC), national research teams carry out the fieldwork and analysis and interpretation of the cases carried out in their countries under the direction of the main contractor who is also responsible for synthesising the results.

Based on the literature review, interviews and analysis of case studies commissioned in the past by the Foundation, a typology for case studies is proposed in Figure 6.

Figure 6: *Proposed typology for Foundation case studies*

Type of case	Exploratory	Explanatory	Example
<b>Main purpose</b>	to investigate a new phenomenon	to test hypotheses derived from previous research	to describe and identify the main features of good practice
<b>Starting point</b>	some preliminary idea of the nature of the phenomenon under investigation; open questions	clear hypotheses and / or research questions	clear criteria for what constitutes ‘good practice’
<b>Sample</b>	opportunistic sampling, designed to capture as broad a range as possible of examples of the phenomenon under question; cases may be named or anonymous	sampling aimed at capturing ‘typicality’ – spread of sectors, organisational sizes etc. ideally selected to enable triangulation with quantitative data sets; normally anonymous	sampling aimed at identifying best practice, with as much replicability as possible; case study organisations are normally named
<b>Main outputs</b>	description of main features of the phenomenon; identification of indicators and research questions to be explored in future studies	scientific argument backed by empirical data aiming to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions	clear case descriptions drawing attention to the main lessons learned and designed to be accessible to a practitioner audience

Source: *Analytica*, 2006

This divides cases into three main types: *exploratory*, *explanatory* and *example* cases. The first two categories broadly correspond to those found in the literature, albeit sometimes under other names (e.g. ‘investigative’ or ‘illustrative’), whilst the third refers to the category often described as ‘good practice’ or ‘best practice’ cases.

## Exploratory case studies

Exploratory case studies are those which are carried out in order to investigate a new phenomenon about which little is known. This might be a new way of working (e.g. ‘follow the sun’ virtual teams), a new HR practice (e.g. the introduction of a new type of reward scheme), or a newly identified social phenomenon (e.g. stress related to being available by mobile phone over an extended working day). Some examples from the past include investigations of practices such as teleworking, job-sharing, offshore outsourcing, profit sharing schemes, workplace bullying, or phased early retirement schemes.

An exploratory case study starts with open questions, such as: Is this really an identifiable phenomenon at all? Does it have any interest for policymakers and if so what? How can it be defined? What are its main features? Could it be identified in the existing statistics and if so how? What are the main costs, benefits, risks and opportunities? Its main purposes are to determine whether future studies would be worthwhile and, if so, to develop indicators and research questions for further investigation.

Because they are venturing into uncharted territory, exploratory case studies cannot aim to find ‘typical’ cases. On the contrary, they may seek to find extreme cases which are not in any way typical in order to explore the outer limits of the phenomenon under study. Exploratory case studies can also accommodate wide variations in depth. In any case study it is important to ensure that the views of more than one respondent are obtained, if only as a ‘reality check’. However, because they are not necessarily aiming to draw firm scientific conclusions, but rather to generate new questions, exploratory case studies do not need to be as rigorous as explanatory cases in obtaining the views of a wide range of different stakeholders. Nevertheless, they should still aim to capture the most significant viewpoints. For instance, an investigation of policies designed to combat race discrimination should at the very least be sure to capture the views of all the main ethnic groups represented in a particular workforce and its surrounding community as well as of the managers tasked with introducing, implementing and evaluating the policy.

Exploratory case studies typically focus on a single phenomenon or group of phenomena. The unit of study may therefore not be the organisation as a whole but rather the particular part of it where the phenomenon is to be found, for instance the study may focus on a particular occupational or demographic subgroup within the workforce, or examine the functioning of a particular department, division or team.

Typical outputs from exploratory case studies might be clear definitions of terms, suggested questions to add to quantitative surveys, the identification of indicators in existing statistics, or proposals for particular questions to be placed on policy agendas.

## Explanatory case studies

Explanatory case studies are closer to the classic sociological model. Starting with clear hypotheses or research questions, normally derived from the results of past research, they aim to investigate these systematically and scientifically with a particular focus on establishing the sorts of causal relationships that are not easy to verify by other means. Explanatory case studies benefit from triangulation with the results of other research (such as surveys, secondary analysis of statistical data etc.).

Especially where a relatively large number of case studies is to be carried out, considerable advance preparation is necessary for explanatory case studies, to ensure that cases are fully comparable on a range of different dimensions and that the same research questions are addressed in each case. The dimensions of comparability need to be clearly established in advance. For instance, if national differences are the main focus of comparison, then it is important that the cases in each country should be as nearly matched as possible in terms of size, sector and other variables; if sectoral variation is the key focus of the study, then cases should be selected on the basis of holding other variables constant so that the sectoral effect can be explored properly, and so on. Within the constraints of the research design, the aim in sampling should be to identify cases that are typical. Typicality can be established by triangulation with other research methods or through identifying key indicators in statistical data. Within the spectrum of typicality, cases should be chosen to illustrate as wide a range as possible. Typicality should not, however, be confused with representativeness. A selection of cases should *not* be considered as a survey with a small sample.

In explanatory case studies, it is particularly important to ensure that the views of a variety of different respondents are sought and the types of respondent should be as similar as possible across the range of cases. For instance, obtaining the views only of managers in one case and only of trade unionists in another will not produce results that are truly comparable. In order to ensure that this full range of views is covered and that respondents are free to give their opinions openly, it is usually preferable to preserve anonymity in explanatory case studies. The aim should be to ensure that every significant assertion made by a respondent is opened up for the possibility of refutation by another, giving the researcher a chance to test the veracity and/or strength of each assertion and arrive at an informed independent judgement.

There is a role for short summaries drawing out the key results and the main aim might be to present the results in a way that is easily digestible by a policy audience. Nevertheless, explanatory case studies should also be reported in depth to open them up for peer review within the scientific research community. Not only is this good research practice; it also adds legitimacy to the results and makes it possible to build on them with confidence in future research.

For this reason, researchers who carry out explanatory case studies should be encouraged to publish their conclusions, not just in reports for policymakers but also in books and scientific journals. Not only do these offer greater scope for in-depth analysis and make the work available for peer review, they can also add value in a more general way by contributing to the development of scholarship as well as enhancing the scientific credibility of the funder's work.

### Example case studies

Example cases, by contrast, aim to describe and identify good or interesting practices with the aim of sharing the lessons learned so that they can be applied more widely. Example case studies may vary considerably in depth. At one extreme are cases that illustrate a single aspect of an organisation's policy in order that others may learn from the experience, for instance, 'this is how company X introduced term-time only working to assist the labour market participation of parents of school-age children'. At the other are multi-case studies that analyse a range of different organisational practices with the aim of deriving general lessons (e.g. a comparison of different approaches to the introduction of team working).

Example case studies typically 'tell a story' in a manner designed to encourage the audience to draw lessons that can be applied in their own organisational or policy settings. Often, the power and credibility of the story depends on the specific reputation of the organisation in which the case study is carried out. It is common, therefore, for organisations and individuals to be named in example case studies. This creates a considerable degree of specificity in the presentation of the case studies. However, this very specificity may make this type of case study particularly likely to become outdated quickly. It is important, therefore, that the date of the case study and the particular circumstances in which it was carried out are made visible in the reporting process.

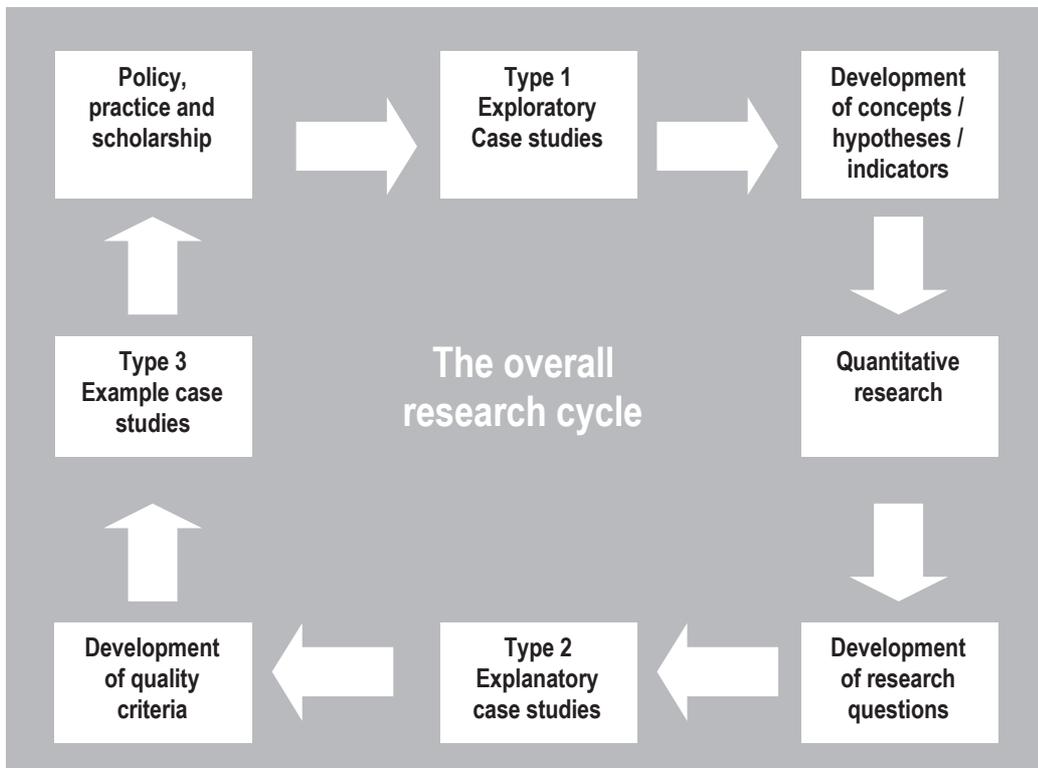
One of the advantages of multi-case example studies is that they can demonstrate very vividly that there may be a variety of different ways to address a particular organisational challenge and that there is no single right solution. In presenting such case studies in a comparative perspective, the strengths and weaknesses of each approach are highlighted. This may mean that not all the practice presented is good. It is of course possible to learn important lessons from the mistakes of others, but this is one reason why the term ‘example’ is to be preferred to ‘good practice’, ‘better practice’ or ‘best practice’ to describe this type of case study.

The approach to identifying suitable cases for example case studies is different from that for exploratory or explanatory ones. Here, the goal is to find organisations prepared to subject themselves to public scrutiny who have found good or innovative solutions to particular challenges. In order to decide whether to investigate a particular organisation it is therefore necessary to have prepared clear definitions in advance, firstly of the nature of the challenge to be investigated (for instance a technological change, the need to implement a new policy directive, the integration of a new demographic group into the workforce, organisational restructuring, a decision to downsize or outsource a service formerly carried out in-house, a merger etc.) and, secondly, of what constitutes ‘good practice’ (typically a list of quality criteria against which the case can be assessed). This implies a careful preparatory process in which criteria and indicators are agreed. In some cases, triangulation with other research methods can make a useful contribution to this process (e.g. by establishing what constitutes an average or typical level of performance).

These three types of case study have been presented here as contrasting types. However in practice they may be strongly complementary to each other. Figure 7 adapts the diagram presented in Figure 1 above in order to show how they fit sequentially into the overall research cycle. Exploratory case studies are undertaken at the point where a new issue or challenge has been identified by policymakers, practitioners or researchers. These exploratory case studies are used to define the concept and generate indicators and hypotheses that can then be addressed systematically in large-scale quantitative research. This quantitative research can provide good information on the scale of the phenomenon and on the characteristics with which it is associated. However whilst quantitative research can demonstrate correlations, it cannot demonstrate causality. In other words it can tell us what is happening but it cannot tell us how or why. It is at this point that the explanatory case studies become important. If properly selected and conducted, these can contribute to a much deeper understanding of the dynamics of change, the roles of the different social actors and the impacts on different groups of the phenomena under study.

The richer insight which is gained from this analysis also makes it possible to identify the range of possible good and bad outcomes which may result from different practices at the organisational level. This in turn makes it possible to develop quality criteria which can feed into the preparatory phases of development of example case studies, in particular informing the selection of cases and the indicators to be used for defining good practice.

Figure 7: Complementarity of the three types of case study



Source: *Analytica*, 2006

The results of the example case studies are then presented to the policy, practitioner and research audiences with the aim of influencing practice, stimulating innovation and bringing about positive social and economic outcomes, as well as contributing to the fine-tuning of future research agendas, bringing the wheel full circle.

The ways in which the three types of case study build on each other would make it possible, in principle, to revisit the same case over time to carry out a case study of each type in sequence, thus contributing a longitudinal depth to the study which is seldom available. Such cases would, however, require extraordinarily prescient selection criteria (or a very large starting sample with a high drop-out rate over time).

# Quality Standards for Case Studies within the Foundation

	Question	Actor	Answer	Immediate action	Next step
<b>1</b>	<b>Determine whether the case study is the appropriate method</b>				
<b>1.1</b>	What is already known about the topic?	EF <sup>2</sup>	Topic is new (i.e. little qualitative or quantitative evidence)	Literature review; expert interviews	Consider <b>exploratory case studies</b>
		EF	There is some quantitative evidence but little is known about <i>how</i> or <i>why</i>	Summarise existing research results; clarify concepts; identify gaps	Consider <b>exploratory case studies</b>
		EF	Both quantitative and qualitative evidence exists but there is a need by policy stakeholders for information about current or best practice in specific contexts	Summarise existing research results; develop criteria for good practices	Consider <b>example case studies</b>
<b>2A</b>	<b>Define the starting point of the research to be done – exploratory case studies</b>				
	What is the starting point for the research?	EF+ <sup>3</sup>	General definition of the issue/topic (see 1.1.)	Brainstorming with experts	<b>Produce clear definition/s</b>
		EF+	Policy relevance	Consultation with policy stakeholders	Define <b>policy relevance</b>
		EF	Identification of relevant stakeholders		Identify <b>relevant stakeholders</b>
		EF	Operational definition		If necessary narrow definition to ensure focus on policy relevant aspects
	What other complementary research methods are envisaged?	EF	Identify other methods (e.g. expert interviews, literature review, expert workshop)	Decide whether to include other methods in separate tender spec. or bundle with case study project	define <b>other research components</b>
	How will the results be used?	EF+	Is the aim to develop indicators to be added to a quantitative survey?	Analyse existing surveys, indicators; identify relevant surveys and data sets	Develop draft form of words to describe <b>need for indicators</b>
			Will the results feed into a conference, workshop or seminar?	Identify relevant types of experts and stakeholders and role of contractors	Define required <b>inputs for EF events</b>
			Should the contractors be asked to make recommendations for future policy or research?	Identify target audiences	Specify <b>need for recommendations</b>
			Will the results be published?	Identify target audiences for dissemination	Define suitable length and publication medium

<sup>2</sup> EF = European Foundation staff

<sup>3</sup> EF+ = European Foundation staff plus expert advisers/policy stakeholders

## Quality standards for case studies in the European Foundation

	Question	Actor	Answer	Immediate action	Next step
<b>2B</b>	<b>Define the starting point of the research to be done – explanatory case studies</b>				
	What research questions should be addressed?	EF	What gaps are there in existing knowledge (see 1.1)?	Identify hypotheses	Formulate <b>clear research questions and/or hypotheses</b> to be tested in the research
	Has the relevant quantitative research been analysed?		If not, decide whether this should be done by contractors and included in tender spec. or carried out separately	Investigate what analyses are already being carried out elsewhere, including any gaps	Produce relevant draft wording for tender spec on need for <b>referring to/analysing relevant data</b>
			Who owns the data and how will they be made available?	Are the data already owned by the EF or do they belong to other bodies, e.g. Eurostat or Member States?	Define access to and usage of data
			Have data protection considerations been taken into account	Check that relevant data are available and conditions on which they can be analysed <sup>4</sup>	In consultation with EF data protection officer, produce relevant draft wording for tender spec./contract on <b>data protection</b>
	How will the results be used?		Will the results feed into a conference, workshop or seminar?	Identify relevant types of experts and stakeholders and role of contractors	Define required <b>inputs for EF events</b>
			Should the contractors be asked to make recommendations for future policy or research?	Identify target audiences	Specify <b>need for recommendations</b>
			Will the results be published?	Identify target audiences for dissemination	Define suitable length and publication media
<b>2C</b>	<b>Define the starting point of the research to be done – example case studies</b>				
	What aspects of practice are of interest to policy stakeholders?	EF+	How is 'good' practice defined?	Analysis of results of existing knowledge (see 1.1.)	Develop list of <b>quality criteria</b>
			Is the aim to illustrate the variety of practices?	Analysis of results of existing knowledge (see 1.1.)	Develop list of <b>selection criteria</b>
	How will the results be used?		Will the results feed into a conference, workshop or seminar?	Identify relevant types of experts and stakeholders and role of contractors	Define required <b>inputs for EF events</b>
			Will the cases be allowed to 'speak for themselves' or should explicit lessons be drawn?	Decide whether a consolidated/synthesis report is required	Develop specification for individual case study report template, and, if relevant, for synthesis report

<sup>4</sup> Refer to EF data protection officer for guidance on making data available to contractors

	Question	Actor	Answer	Immediate action	Next step
<b>3</b>	<b>Develop the research specification</b>				
<b>3.1</b>	What is the unit of analysis?	EF	In the light of the particular topic under discussion, decide on the most appropriate unit (e.g. national policy, firm policy, department, value chain)	Discuss the extent to which this unit should be clearly specified and the extent to which potential contractors should be asked to make proposals on the unit	Agree general form of words to describe the unit of analysis
	Exploratory cases	EF	What is the range of aspects to be explored?	Discuss the range of cases required to explore the 'outer limits' of the definition. Might this imply a deliberate selection of different units of analysis?	Agree form of words to describe the features that should be present in each case to ensure valid comparison
	Explanatory cases	EF	Which aspects of the cases are most important for comparative purposes?	Which unit of analysis is most likely to yield comparability at an international level?	Agree form of words to describe the <i>dimensions</i> of cases to be taken into account in the selection process
	Example cases	EF	At which level are decisions most likely to be taken that determine good practice?	Discuss the variety of practices that the study should illustrate and the actors most likely to shape these practices distinctively in different contexts	Agree form of words to describe the <i>range</i> of cases to be undertaken
<b>3.2</b>	National selection	EF+	With the increasing size of the EU it is becoming more and more expensive to include cases from every Member State in each project involving case studies. However, as an EU-wide organisation it is also of course important that the Foundation pays attention to European diversity in its research and ensures that a broad cross-section is represented in any given study. It is also important that the same countries are not picked in every study.	Ensure that there is a coherent rationale for any choice of countries by considering such questions as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ How likely are the issues under study to vary according to the influence of different European social models?</li> <li>■ How dependent are they likely to be on different national industrial structures?</li> <li>■ To what extent are they likely to vary according to demographic structure?</li> <li>■ To what extent are new Member States likely to exhibit distinctive profiles?</li> <li>■ Is the issue particularly politically sensitive in some Member States?</li> <li>■ Is there a need for comparators outside the EU?</li> </ul>	Agree on the number of countries to include in the study and specify which countries these should be (in some cases it may be legitimate to leave the choice to the contractor, giving clear guidelines on range and selection criteria)

## Quality standards for case studies in the European Foundation

	Question	Actor	Answer	Immediate action	Next step
3.3	Number and distribution of cases	EF	The number of case studies to be carried out will be partly dependent on the number of countries involved. However, it will also reflect other variables, depending on the complexity of the questions addressed and the extent to which comparative analysis will be carried out.	Two competing objectives have to be addressed here: on the one hand, achieving a broad <i>spread</i> of cases and on the other, ensuring that there is enough <i>similarity</i> between cases to enable comparisons to be carried out, for instance between different countries, different sectors or different company size categories. A balance also has to be struck between <i>breadth</i> and <i>depth</i> . For complex issues, fewer deeper cases may be preferable to a larger number of 'quick' cases.	Specify the total number of cases and/or the number of cases per country OR formulate wording for tender specification asking proposers to specify the number of cases
	Exploratory cases	EF/Ten <sup>5</sup>	Here, the goal is to ensure that cases capture a wide range, concentrating especially on 'extreme'/'difficult' cases.	Consider which variables are significant, and which dimensions are likely to affect these variables (e.g. sector, company size, country).	Propose a number of cases taking into account budgetary and other limitations.
	Explanatory cases	EF/Ten	Here the goal is to ensure that the relevant research questions are fully addressed. This implies ensuring that cases are <i>comparable</i> across key dimensions.	Identify the key dimensions for comparison (e.g. type of policy, sector, business function, company size etc.) and the range of different national contexts across which these should be compared.	Propose a number of cases taking into account budgetary and other limitations as well as national distribution and key dimensions for comparison.
		Ten		Critically examine the tender specification, taking account of the existing literature to ensure feasibility of any proposed breakdown of cases.	Propose a case study matrix, with numbers broken down by key variables (e.g. country x, sector x, size)
	Example cases	EF/Ten	Here the goal is to illustrate a range of current practices.	Examine the evidence on current practice to gain an impression of what range of 'good practice' is likely to exist and where it is likely to be found.	Propose a number of cases taking into account budgetary and other limitations and the complexity of the practices under study.
		Ten		Identify key dimensions of practice to establish the range of examples to be sought and key variables to illustrate this range.	Propose a number of cases broken down by key variables (e.g. country, type of company, market situation etc.).

<sup>5</sup> Ten = Potential contractors invited to tender

	Question	Actor	Answer	Immediate action	Next step
3.4	Develop a realistic timetable	EF	<i>See Appendix A, Checklist 2</i>		
3.5	Finalise proposal specification	EF	<i>See Appendix A, Checklist 1</i>		
<b>4</b>	<b>Developing a proposal</b>				
4.1	Summarise state of the art	Ten	Literature review	Draw attention to any answered questions or aspects of the tender specification that require further attention	Briefly summarise existing knowledge
4.2	Select national partners <sup>6</sup>	Ten	(If this question is left open in the tender specification; also specify countries). Discuss specification with partners	(If relevant, develop rationale for choice of countries, taking into account European diversity as well as the specific characteristics required to address the topic under study)	Make a proposal for national selection of cases and research partners
4.3	Describe methodology	Ten	Consider what will be involved in carrying out the case studies and any ethical issues involved	Include: research instruments; access; obtaining informed consent; interview methods; record-keeping; analysis; interpretation	Summarise methodology
4.4	Describe management plan	Ten	Develop a management plan including communications and quality control	Identify key performance indicators and milestones	Propose a management plan
4.5	Carry out risk analysis	Ten	Identify what might go wrong and what remedial action could be taken	Identify trouble-shooting mechanisms and key clauses required in subcontracts to address any problems	Summarise risk analysis
4.6	Develop timetable	Ten	Critically examine feasibility of outline timetable proposed by EF	Develop a more detailed breakdown with rationale for any variations	Summarise timetable
4.7	Develop budget	Ten	Based on timetable and research partners' day rates	Break down person-rates by activity and add expenses	Summarise costs
4.8	Describe deliverables	Ten	Look critically at specification	Consider most appropriate approach and outline contents	Present CVs in specified format
4.9	Prepare CVs	Ten	Collect CVs from partners	Edit to highlight relevant experience and publications	Deliver proposal
4.10	Ensure that all legal and financial information is in order	Ten			

<sup>6</sup> In the case of example case studies it may be possible for all the case studies to be carried out by a single contractor

## Quality standards for case studies in the European Foundation

	Question	Actor	Answer	Immediate action	Next step
5	Select contractor	EF	<i>See Appendix A, Checklist 3</i>		
5.1	Negotiate main contract	EF, Con <sup>7</sup>	Agree and sign main contract		
5.2	Negotiate sub-contracts	Con, NP <sup>8</sup>	<i>See Appendix A, Checklist 5</i>		
6.0	Kick-off meeting	EF, Con (NP also if agreed)	<i>See Appendix A, Checklist 4</i>		
7.0		Con, NP			
7.1	Ensure full background knowledge	Con, NP	Share key literature results	If necessary, NPs to carry out national scoping exercise	Summarise key research questions and/or hypotheses
7.2	Develop research instruments	Con, NP	Develop research instruments. Ensure inputs from all NP before finalising	NP to adapt for specific organisational contexts and respondent types	Finalise research instruments
7.3	Develop case study matrix	Con, NP	Develop an 'ideal' distribution of cases by size, sector, country and other relevant variables	Ongoing dialogue about feasibility of finding these in each country	Circulate draft matrix
7.4	Negotiate access	Con, NP	Con to approve cases on the basis of an outline discussion before proceeding with full fieldwork	Continuous process of adjustment of matrix to take account of access achieved	Formalise access – including ensuring informed consent
7.5	Develop reporting format	Con, NP	Con to circulate draft structure for case study report	NP to draft case study reports If agreed, also include case summary sheets	Circulate report format
7.6	Write case study reports	NP	Drawing on interview records, analyse cases	Write reports in agreed format, including illustrative quotes	Deliver draft case study reports to Con
7.7	Feedback loop	Con, NP	Con gives feedback to NP on draft reports	If necessary, NP collects additional information or revises report	Deliver final case study reports to Con
7.8	Write draft synthesis report	Con	Drawing on case study reports and, where relevant, summary sheets, interpret case study results	Write draft report, where necessary checking back with NP for extra information or to test interpretation	Circulate draft report to EF and NP and, if relevant, to peer reviewers or policy stakeholders
7.9	Revise synthesis report	Con	Take account of feedback from EF, NP and other stakeholders	Prepare final report using agreed templates	Deliver final report
7.10	Prepare any other deliverables agreed in the contract	Con	Take account of feedback from EF, NP and other stakeholders	Prepare to agreed format	Deliver

<sup>7</sup> Con = Main contractor

<sup>8</sup> NP = National partners

<sup>9</sup> Under some circumstances, it may be appropriate to circulate draft reports to representatives of case study companies, especially if there is a need to check accuracy. However, they should not be given a right of veto.

	<b>Question</b>	<b>Actor</b>	<b>Answer</b>	<b>Immediate action</b>	<b>Next step</b>
<b>8</b>	Publish report(s)	EF	<i>See Appendix A. Checklist 6</i>		
<b>8.1</b>	Dissemination and follow-up	EF			
	Exploratory case study report	EF	Meetings of stakeholders to discuss how to develop further	Examine feasibility of including additional questions in existing surveys	Dissemination to scientific and policy audiences
	Explanatory	EF	Conferences and seminars – scientific and policy	Encourage authors to submit papers to scientific journals	Dissemination of synthesis report mainly to scientific audiences. Publish in hard copy and on the EF Website
	Examples	EF	Seminars and workshops - mainly aimed at practitioners	Individual case study reports on EF Website	Dissemination mainly to policy stakeholders. Synthesis report not normally necessary.

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# Appendix A: checklists

## 1. Tender Specification

A typical tender specification for a case study project should include the following:

1. Aims of the study
2. Deliverables and intended audiences for these – which might include:
  - background literature review/discussion document
  - case study synthesis report
  - individual case study report
  - inputs to workshop/seminar/conferences
  - inputs to further studies (e.g. survey design)
3. Specification of case studies, including:
  - Number of case studies,
  - National distribution\*
  - Unit of analysis\*
  - Other relevant details\* (e.g. sector)
4. Timescale
5. Budget
6. Timing and frequency of meetings with the Foundation
7. Appendices:
  - contract details
  - templates

\* If desired, these may be left undefined in the specification, and tenderers asked to make suggestions

## 2. Draft Timetable

### 1-year case study project (exploratory and explanatory case studies<sup>10</sup>)

Month	EF	Main Contractor/ coordinator	National partners
1	Contract awarded	Agree and sign contract	Agree and sign sub-contracts
2	Kick-off meeting		
		Brief national partners; agree procedures Develop draft research instruments	
3		Finalise research instruments	Negotiate access to case studies
4	Informal check on progress	Manage fieldwork	Commence fieldwork
5		Manage fieldwork	Ongoing fieldwork
6		Manage fieldwork, quality checks, commence analysis, Write interim report	Ongoing fieldwork, commence case study reports
7	Study interim report; decide whether progress meeting necessary	Analyse case study reports	Finish individual case study reports
	Optional progress meeting		
8		Interpretation of results; check details with national partners	Follow-up interviews as required
9		Write draft synthesis report	
10	Discuss and give feedback on draft synthesis report	Complete and distribute draft synthesis report	Discuss and give feedback on draft synthesis report (where relevant) write final individual case study reports in standard format for web publication
11	Optional meeting to discuss results of synthesis report with stakeholders		
12		Write final synthesis report, (where relevant: quality check final individual case study reports)	
	Edit reports for final publication		

Note : This timetable assumes a well-specified project on a topic on which some groundwork has already been done and a team of researchers ready to hit the ground running – including already having good contacts with case study organisations in order to ensure rapid access. A longer timetable is desirable: if there is a need for contractors to carry out additional work, e.g. a preliminary literature review; if the case studies involve a relatively unexplored topic; if access to organisations has to be negotiated from scratch; if the case studies involve less experienced researchers or those who require help with translation into English, or if there is a need for in-depth analysis and interpretation of the results. Ideally, case study projects should have a duration of at least 18 months. If a longitudinal element is included, requiring repeat visits to observe changes over time, then the minimum duration should be three years.

<sup>10</sup> Because a synthesis report is not necessarily required for exemplary case studies, there is not necessarily a role for a two-tier structure with a main contractor and national partners. It is therefore possible to develop a more streamlined timetable with individual contractors carrying out exemplary case studies on a more ad hoc basis.

### 3. Selection/award criteria

Criterion	Indicators
Knowledge of the topic	Proposal; quality of references, publications
Awareness of the policy relevance of the topic	Proposal; CVs of partners (for evidence of relevant experience)
Experience in carrying out case studies	Proposal (especially discussion of methodology and risk analysis); CVs of partners; publications
Experience in participating in European consortia	CVs of partners
Writing experience	Past publications
(if relevant) Experience of triangulating quantitative and qualitative data	Proposal; CVs of partners
Scientific reputation	Publications; check with Google Scholar
Experience of research management	Proposal (especially risk analysis); CVs of partners; references
Awareness of research ethics	Proposal
Value for money	Proposal (especially budget)
Financial probity	Usual checks; references

### 4. Kick-off meeting agenda

1. Introductions
2. Aims of the project
3. Methodology. In particular, check:
  - How will the main contractor ensure that all national partners share a common understanding of the research questions?
  - What research instruments will be used and how will they be developed?
  - How will access to cases be negotiated?
  - What guarantees of confidentiality will be given?
  - Will cases be anonymised?
  - How will informed consent be gained?
  - How many interviews will be carried out per case, and with which stakeholders?
  - How will a diversity perspective be captured?
  - Will all interviews be carried out face-to-face and if not what other methods will be used?
  - Will interviews be recorded?
  - What methods will be used for analysis?
  - Who will interpret the results? (National partners or coordinator or some combination of the two?)
  - How will bias be avoided in the interpretation?
  - What methods will be used to ensure national inputs into the interpretation process?

- What records will be kept by national partners?
  - Will individual case study reports be available for publication and if so who will write and edit them?
4. Project management. In particular check:
- How will the coordinator keep track of progress?
  - How will quality be checked?
  - What happens if a national partner fails to gain access to the requisite number/type of case?
  - What mechanisms will be used to ensure agreement between the partners and if necessary resolve conflicts?
5. Intellectual property
- How will authors be credited?
  - Who owns copyright in which parts of the work?
6. Data protection
- Who is the 'controller' of the data collected?
  - How will data be stored and for how long will it be kept?
  - Who will have access to the data?
7. Deliverables
- Ensure clear agreement about number and nature of deliverables
  - Specify templates
8. Timetable
- Agree timetable and check that it is feasible
9. Meetings
- Agree number and timing of meetings between the coordinator and the Foundation
  - Agree whether national partners and/or additional stakeholders should be invited
  - Agree whether Foundation representatives should attend meetings between coordinator and national partners
10. Any other business

## **5. Subcontract between main contractor and national partners**

1. Clear reference to terms of main contract between Foundation and main contractor
2. Specification of the work to be done
3. Specification of timescale
4. Specification of payment schedule, including approvals necessary to trigger release of payments
5. Specification of quality control procedures (including commitment by subcontractor to revisit case study informants to collect extra information at the interpretation stage if necessary)

6. Specification of ownership of copyright
7. Specification of authors' rights to be acknowledged and cited
8. Specification of who is the 'controller' of the data collected
9. Specification of ethical obligations (see <http://www.respectproject.org> for further information)
10. Conflict resolution procedure
11. Termination of contract
12. National law which applies

## 6. Publication checklist

1. Correct use of templates
2. Agree metadata categories for web publication
3. Check metadata coding
4. Accuracy check
5. Language check
6. House style check
7. Use of quotations,<sup>11</sup> summary boxes and other aids for 'bringing cases to life'.
8. Bibliographic check
9. Correct attribution of authorship and of the framework within which the research was carried out
10. Technical annex including
  - When and where the case studies were carried out
  - Details of the research team
  - How many interviews were conducted
  - How they were conducted
  - How the results were analysed
11. Case Study Matrix

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<sup>11</sup> Note that quotations should be attributed according to role – e.g. 'a senior manager', 'a trade union representative', 'a customer', 'a front-line worker' etc.

# Appendix B Case study research within the Foundation

## Past Practice

Case study research has played an important part in the Foundation's work for many years, with a range of practices that have evolved to meet specific policy and research needs.

As already noted, these cases have spanned the entire range from exploratory and explanatory to example case studies.

Compared with case studies commissioned by other funders, they have been distinctive in three respects: by placing a very high importance on *policy relevance*; by including a strongly *internationally comparative* element; and by giving a high priority to *user-friendly dissemination*, whether this has taken the form of summary reports published in hard copy or of individual case studies published on the Foundation's website.

Case study reporting takes several formats. Most commonly, cases are analysed first at a national level and the national reports are then used as the basis of a synthesis or 'consolidated' report. These synthesis reports vary in format. Some reports, for instance *Promoting Gender Equality in the Workplace* and *Case studies on practice of European Work Councils: a Conceptual Framework*, include detailed methodology sections. However, there is little consistency in the contents of these sections which may comprise some combination of: a rationale for the selection of cases; a case study matrix; 'key point summary sheets'; a reflexive discussion of the limitations of the research; the number of interviews carried out; the time frame of the research or comments on the fieldwork, but never includes all of these. Sometimes, there is almost no information about methodology.

In some cases, the case study research is explicitly related to and triangulated with comparable quantitative research. A good example of this is *Flexibility and Working Conditions: a qualitative and comparative study in seven Member States*. This report also presents a clear summary matrix drawing attention to the key analytical dimensions of each case.

Methods for bringing the cases to life in these reports vary too. Sometimes the cases are summarised in a text box, for example in *Integrated Approaches to Active Welfare and Employment Policies*. On other occasions, direct quotations from the interviews are used, but these are not usually attributed to particular stakeholder groups, which somewhat diminishes their value.

In addition to case study synthesis reports, and – in the case of some of the EMCC case studies – instead of them, individual case studies are presented on the Foundation's website.

Because of the large number of cases, and the requirement that they should be readily accessible to non-specialist audiences, a pattern appears to be emerging, exemplified in the *Ageing Workforce*, *Social Public Services*, and EMCC case studies, whereby a large number of cases are placed on the website in a searchable form, each presented in a 2–4 page format, using a standard template.

## Views on current practice

During the summer and autumn of 2006, interviews were carried out with key informants within the Foundation or connected with it by Analytica. Three stakeholder groups were identified and individuals recruited to each of these. Respondents were randomly selected from a contact list provided by the Foundation.

The three main groups that were considered for this research were:

- Group A consisting of researchers who have been involved in carrying out case study research for the Foundation in the past
- Group B consisting of the Foundation's board members
- Group C consisting of internal staff at the Foundation (including technical ICT and web editing staff).

Respondents were invited by email to participate in the study. If they consented, telephone interviews were carried out, with the interviews lasting about 45–60 minutes. Interview questions varied somewhat between the three groups but generally discussed the following topics:

- Involvement in case study research
- Definitions of different types of case studies
- Role of the Foundation
- Evaluation of the briefing, project management and dissemination process
- Methodological issues in case study research (including strengths and weaknesses of quantitative versus qualitative methods)
- Preferred length and structure of case study reports
- Issues of anonymity and confidentiality
- Validity and longevity of case studies
- Effective ways of presenting case studies on the Foundation's website
- Role of case study research in comparative research

Full interviews were carried out with seven researchers, five internal staff from the Foundation and two members of the Foundation's Board. The information derived from these interviews was supplemented by information from shorter interviews with two further external researchers and by information from the steering group of Foundation staff set up to monitor the project's progress.

A brainstorming workshop held with Foundation staff and external experts in October 2006 provided an opportunity for in-depth discussion of many of the issues that were raised in different ways by the literature survey, the case study analysis as well as in the individual interviews. Data protection and intellectual property issues were discussed in this workshop as well as a number of aspects of case study management, research and dissemination.

Finally, a further workshop was held in February 2007 to present the draft report and obtain further feedback from Foundation staff. A presentation at this workshop by Jörg Flecker, the scientific director of Forschungs- und Beratungsstelle Arbeitswelt (FORBA), the Vienna-based Working Life Research Centre provided a good starting point for a discussion of the practicalities of managing large international comparative case study research projects and the scientific and organisational issues that can arise.

## **The general value of case study research**

Interviewees affirmed that case study research is a useful tool to investigate the impact of policies and company practices in depth and on a comparative level. The case study method has gained a reputation for producing useful in-depth findings relevant to the Foundation's three key stakeholder groups. There was also a general recognition that a more consistent approach to case study research is needed and the commissioning of the current quality assurance project was regarded as the right level of investment.

The role of case study research was seen as particularly useful when following up survey results or when reported in conjunction with survey findings with the aim of illuminating a topic of investigation from several angles. One view put forward was that research projects should be planned in a triangulated design rather than keeping the planning of surveys and case study research separate. By 'packaging' research design in this way, it was considered that the Foundation could adopt a more systematic and embedded approach to research.

Critical remarks in this context were made in relation to the reliability of case study research and the level of generalisation. Due to that fact that little longitudinal case study research has been carried out, there remains a degree of mistrust regarding this method in the sense of 'how do we really know that these findings are still relevant a year later or even by the time they are published?' A need was seen for the Foundation to begin thinking about ways in which a longitudinal dimension could be implemented.

With regard to the type of case study the Foundation should promote, the majority of respondents agreed that in-depth (explanatory) case studies were the most useful. The deeper and more detailed the investigation is, the more robust the findings will be, which is something the Foundation needs to consider when disseminating to key stakeholder groups. Focusing too much on 'surface', small scale investigations (example cases) may not result in high quality findings and knowledge which is crucial for the key stakeholder groups of the Foundation. Nevertheless, it was also acknowledged that example cases play a valuable role.

There was also a broad agreement on the need for transparency about case study methodology: case study reports should consistently include an agreed minimum of methodological information, such as what research questions were investigated, case study selection criteria, the date of the research and the numbers of interviews. They should also point out any limitations of the study.

In addition to methodological reflexivity, a number of respondents also identified a need to conceptualise a research topic fully. The design of case studies should always be embedded in a conceptual framework and reference should be made to the relevant literature, in accordance with academic standards.

Some doubts were expressed regarding the necessity for confidentiality of cases: it was seen by some as more useful to know what companies or institutions were investigated in order to use case study findings effectively. Naming companies was also seen as a quality assurance criterion, to demonstrate to the public that the Foundation's case study research is credible. The assurance of confidentiality and anonymity should be decided upon in the context of particular projects and not be part of an obligatory research guideline.

External researchers expressed a range of viewpoints. Two felt that how they were briefed and how the project was managed were entirely satisfactory. They said that the Foundation's project managers had provided clear guidelines and demonstrated a good understanding of the research process. Where more critical remarks were made, these mainly referred to some weaknesses around the notion of 'best practice cases'. The researchers said that they had found it

difficult to select a small number of cases out of hundreds of possibilities. They said that they would have welcomed clearer criteria to guide them in case study selection.

Another issue that was raised by most of the researchers was that of time-scale. Most felt that it would have been an advantage to have more time at the research design stage to develop and consolidate concepts and plan the work. Some Foundation staff also agreed that it was sometimes difficult to carry out good qualitative research within the constraints of one-year funding cycles. However, the general consensus among Foundation staff was that compressed time-scales were part of the reality of carrying out policy-related research and something that had to be taken into account in the research planning stage. It was clear that with appropriate planning there was scope for carrying out projects with a duration of more than one year.

Issues of case study presentation played a large role in many of the discussions with the Foundation staff. It was clear that a lot of effort had been put into the development of standardised templates for case study write-up and reporting. These templates have been used for some projects and are particularly useful to standardise the publishing of case studies on the web. The motivation to develop such standardised approaches stemmed from inconsistency in case study reporting and the desire was to develop common approaches. The model that was arrived at represents a compromise: a semi-standardised approach which on the one hand includes standard metadata and on the other leaves space for additional information under headings such as ‘further information about the case’, allowing for variations to be agreed on a project-by-project basis.

The development and application of a template approach is seen as useful and seems to have worked so far as a quality assurance measure. However, some staff remarked during interviews that they felt these templates need to be reviewed in order to be improved.

It was emphasised by several interviewees that the increasingly standardised presentation of cases on the web needed to be complemented by reports in which the cases were analysed and interpreted in depth and the main policy conclusions drawn. The shorter the individual case study reports, the greater the requirement for deeper interpretation elsewhere.

Interviewed staff also raised a number of questions that they feel the Foundation needs to address in the future: Should individual case studies always be reported or should they sometimes only feature as a basis for consolidated reports? Should there be a consistent approach (i.e. always publishing individual case study reports) or should the decision be made on a project-by-project basis, depending on the nature of the research topic, the scope of the study and the available resources?

Some staff also queried the need for large numbers of case studies in any given project. The question raised here was how useful (and methodologically sensible) a large volume of cases were (as compared to a survey on the one hand or a smaller number of deeper cases on the other). Interviewed staff remarked that the impact of a case study collection is difficult to assess, particularly by type of user group. Unfortunately, there are no good web statistics indicating how often case studies are viewed, so little hard evidence is available about who uses the case studies and how, and this is something they would like to see explored further. Whilst requiring visitors to the website to register their details can be off-putting, it might be worth considering, at least for an experimental period. This allows for the option of asking users to provide information, perhaps on a voluntary basis, about their reasons for accessing any given case study together with a rating of how useful they have found it.

It is clear that achieving a balance between depth and contextualisation on the one hand, and readability, accessibility and comprehensiveness on the other, is a major challenge for the presentation of the Foundation’s case studies in the future.