Longitudinal studies usually involve collecting statistical data over time from the same or a similar group of respondents. The ‘Class of 2010’ project is a qualitative longitudinal research study (QLR) into the changes experienced by one school that converted to academy status in 2010 due to challenging circumstances. Under the Labour administration of 1997–2010, converting schools into academies was designed, first, to challenge the culture of underachievement in areas of high deprivation and, second, to encourage schools to play a part in local community regeneration.

We were interested in the experience of the first students starting at the new academy. We were also interested in the changing aims and priorities of the academy leadership, the perceptions that teachers had of working there and the progress of the student cohort we were studying.

We started the research in the summer of 2011 when our Class of 2010 were at the end of Year 7. We visited the school at a similar time each year until 2015 to interview senior leadership, teaching staff and a sample of pupils. In this article, we consider the importance of QLR and some methodological issues for our project. This should enable you to identify the strengths and weaknesses of this research method.

### The project context

The policy of the UK Labour government of 1997–2010 to tackle underperformance in the most challenging secondary schools (national challenge schools) provided the context for this research. The aim of the policy was to create autonomous ‘academies’...
that were independent of the local authority, managed instead by a team of independent co-sponsors with the freedom to generate the kind of entrepreneurial leadership more usually associated with private-sector business.

The subsequent Conservative government policy on academies has changed this initial aim. Indeed, the Conservative government has recently announced a controversial policy to require all schools to become academies, making research into academies particularly important.

Our academy was located in a coastal area with high levels of socio-economic deprivation. The school concerned had the lowest performance at GCSE in the local authority and was often the last-choice school for parents and prospective pupils. The new academy status was seen as an opportunity to turn the school around via educational sponsorship by a university, thereby giving the school for parents and prospective pupils.

The new academy status was seen as an opportunity to turn the school around via educational sponsorship by a university, thereby giving the school a different ‘option’ (as this changed considerably over time), and the details of individual staff and student experiences.

Over the years, we could see differing patterns of response by staff and students. Some embraced the new developments, others chose to accommodate them, others engaged a little, and others left the school. Using QLR we can hear participants’ voices and we ensured that this was the case in our reports. Feedback to the academy leadership on both staff and student views was a significant part of the project’s integrity.

Crucially, using QLR allows the same researchers to interview the same participants over time, allowing issues and concerns to be followed up from previous years. We interviewed the same academy leaders and students, but different teachers each year. We designed the QLR in this way to retain the consistency of views from those leading the academy and from those who were experiencing the institution as learners.

However, by changing the teachers interviewed to those who were teaching the Class of 2010 in each particular year (as this changed considerably over time), we received a wider range of views from the teachers responsible for carrying out the leadership’s vision. This provided a deeper understanding of the academy than interviewing the same staff each year.

Linking macro and micro processes
QLR can support researchers in linking the macro (or large) processes — such as the policy context or school institutional context — to how change feels for those experiencing it at the micro level. Linking these different levels of analysis makes the research potentially useful to a wide range of different people, including policymakers, school sponsors, parents and individual teachers.

What are the strengths of QLR?
There are three main strengths of QLR for a study like ours.

Studying processes over time
QLR allows researchers to explore the context of the ‘thing’ being studied, the processes that shape it, and their effects over time at the individual level. In our case, the ‘thing’ being studied was a new academy. This was expected to show a rapid improvement in performance based on GCSE results, organisational restructuring (a new principal, new rules, new school day schedule etc.), and the details of individual staff and student experiences.

Over the years, we could see differing patterns of response by staff and students. Some embraced the new developments, others chose to accommodate them, others engaged a little, and others left the school. Using QLR we can hear participants’ voices and we ensured that this was the case in our reports. Feedback to the academy leadership on both staff and student views was a significant part of the project’s integrity.

Crucially, using QLR allows the same researchers to interview the same participants over time, allowing issues and concerns to be followed up from previous years. We interviewed the same academy leaders and students, but different teachers each year. We designed the QLR in this way to retain the consistency of views from those leading the academy and from those who were experiencing the institution as learners.

However, by changing the teachers interviewed to those who were teaching the Class of 2010 in each particular year (as this changed considerably over time), we received a wider range of views from the teachers responsible for carrying out the leadership’s vision. This provided a deeper understanding of the academy than interviewing the same staff each year.

Linking macro and micro processes
QLR can support researchers in linking the macro (or large) processes — such as the policy context or school institutional context — to how change feels for those experiencing it at the micro level. Linking these different levels of analysis makes the research potentially useful to a wide range of different people, including policymakers, school sponsors, parents and individual teachers.

What are the weaknesses of QLR?
QLR also has weaknesses (Farrall 2006).

It is resource-heavy
It takes a lot of resources — time, money and hours — to plan, prepare, undertake, transcribe and analyse the interviews involved in QLR.

It takes time
It may take several years (even decades) before any useful information becomes identifiable. Our research found both short-term and longer-term change in the institution. Immediate steps were taken to try to improve pupils’ exam results, but there were also longer-term changes introduced designed to gradually shift the culture of the school so that pupils and staff expected higher levels of achievement.

You lose research participants
Some interviewees are always likely to pull out of the research process and even more so with an extended timeframe. It is always worth initially having a larger set of interviewees to allow for attrition in QLR, but it does add to the cost. Interestingly, one of the reasons given for interviewees leaving a QLR study is ‘question fatigue’. This means that the participant effectively

---

**Box 1 Methods**

Qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) is associated with exploring social change over time and is open-ended, taking any length of time from months to decades. It can use different types of method and the methods employed can be changed during a study to accommodate issues that arise during the data collection phase.

The study methods we used were:
- an annual school visit that included semi-structured interviews with the principal and/or a senior leader, a sample of four teachers teaching the Class of 2010, a sample of 15 pupils
- collecting anonymised Class of 2010 data on levels of progress and attainment
- examining the academy’s publicly available data to provide context for the annual research visit and studying academy documentation such as the improvement plan, organisational structure and relevant policies

Each year we provided a report on our findings to the academy. We think of the findings as a photograph album that tells the story of this school’s life at particular moments over time.

---

www.hoddereducation.co.uk/sociologyreview
gets bored with being asked the same thing in each interview and may disengage from the research.

QLR research in action
Sociologists understand that there are different versions of ‘the truth’ depending on context, personal beliefs, values and attitudes. We aimed in our research to provide an independent view of what was going on in the new academy, but we recognise that this is not the same as being objective. The methods we used were chosen to give a range of perspectives.

Remaining independent during QLR brings challenges because one develops relationships with the institution and the participants. For us, the main challenges here were fourfold.

How representative was our teacher sample?
The selection of the four teachers of Class of 2010 for interview each year was undertaken by the academy principal. We had to hope that a representative sample of teachers was provided for interview, but we did wonder if pro-leadership teachers might be selected rather than dissident teachers.

How truthful were the teachers?
Our promise of confidentiality to the teachers offered some identity protection, but leadership knew that the views could only come from a limited number of teachers and we realised that this may have impacted on how teachers responded to questions.

In the first 2 years of the study, we found that teachers tended to have generally favourable views on leadership decisions. But was this because they were employed by the new principal and, therefore, supported her approach? By year three our research had become established and our reports demonstrated that we could be ‘trusted’, which enabled us to request teachers with a range of views. These interviews yielded both positive and negative responses, allowing richer annual reports.

Could we stay independent?
There was a possibility that we could become too involved with the academy to provide an independent view. We were aware that researchers in QLR are placed somewhere on the ‘insider-outsider’ continuum (Mercer 2007), which is influenced by a range of characteristics including gender and topic of conversation, and that all research presents thorny practical problems.

Eventually we found that access to the research site became easier and our growing knowledge of how the academy worked established a ‘heightened familiarity’ (Mercer 2007, p. 11). We were very careful to construct relatively open interview questions to enable participants to respond in whichever way they chose. We also ensured that follow-up questions were neutral in approach. We critically evaluated each set of interviews before drawing up the next interview schedules to ensure these principles were followed each year.

Could we keep the students on board?
To support student involvement over time we wrote an annual report for them that outlined the points they had raised. All our students volunteered for the research and were made aware each year of their right to withdraw at any point. As far as possible we also had the same researcher interviewing the same students in order to build up a relationship. Over the first 5 years we had seven students who lost interest and withdrew (mostly male), giving us an attrition rate of 46.6%. Our eight remaining students provided a small sample, with more
females than males, but it did represent a full range of abilities, interests and views about the school.

We used the same semi-structured interview schedule with students during the years of the study so that we could monitor attitude change towards particular areas of school organisation, such as teaching and learning and extra-curricular activities. However, the students who were less interested said little, suggesting that a different or more varied data collection approach may have been helpful to maintain their interest.

Also, students who were having challenges in or outside of school may have found the questions difficult to respond to. Refining our data collection techniques and finding out more information relevant to the cohort before each visit might have reduced our loss of participants.

**Conclusion**

QLR enables the establishment of long-term relationships with those being studied. This allowed us to generate rich, detailed and valuable data on a new academy and on its efforts to transform a school from low to high performance at a challenging time in English education. The key elements that supported our research and enabled it to continue for 5 years were as follows:

- The development of trust between the project and participants at all levels of the research was critical. This was established by commitment to the research, our sensitive use of data and meeting agreed outputs, such as the annual reports.
- Also significant was the development of our relationship with the school by demonstrating that we were genuinely interested in what was happening during their process of change and that we understood fully the issues faced.

QLR has strengths and weakness, but with careful planning of data collection techniques and real consideration of whom and what you are researching, useful data can be collected. Examples of the practical issues we have encountered may help to inform future longitudinal research studies in the sociology of education, particularly qualitative studies.

### References


---

Tanya Ovenden-Hope is director of education for The Cornwall College Group, visiting research fellow with Plymouth University, and adjunct professor at Cape Breton.

Rowena Passy is a research fellow at Plymouth University.