

Put the users in focus! How focus-groups with users in quality reviews contributes to improved statistics

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Abstract

Statistics Norway has carried out in-depth quality reviews of individual statistics for many years. The quality reviews are systematic reviews of a statistical production process to identify strengths and weaknesses with the statistics. This results in a report with recommendations and a plan for improvement actions. Focus groups with users are a key element as part of the quality reviews and enable direct feedback from the users on the statistics.

To recruit participants for focus groups, a user and stakeholder analysis is the basis. The statistics officers score the users according to how much influence they have on user needs and how much they are impacted by the statistics. Users with the highest scores are recruited, but it is important that several types of users are represented, for example journalists as representatives of the public.

1-2 focus groups are conducted, each with up to 6 participants. The aim is to create a dialogue between users about user needs. An independent moderator leads the conversation. The moderator has prepared an interview guide that is closely linked to the five quality principles in the European Statistics Code of Practice (ESCoP, 2017).

The focus groups are conducted as on-line meetings, and a video recording of the session is taken to document the views of the participants as input for assessing strengths and weaknesses. The quality team and the statistics officers observe the meeting and are not allowed to interfere in the discussion. Any feedback is discussed with the participants afterwards the focus group.

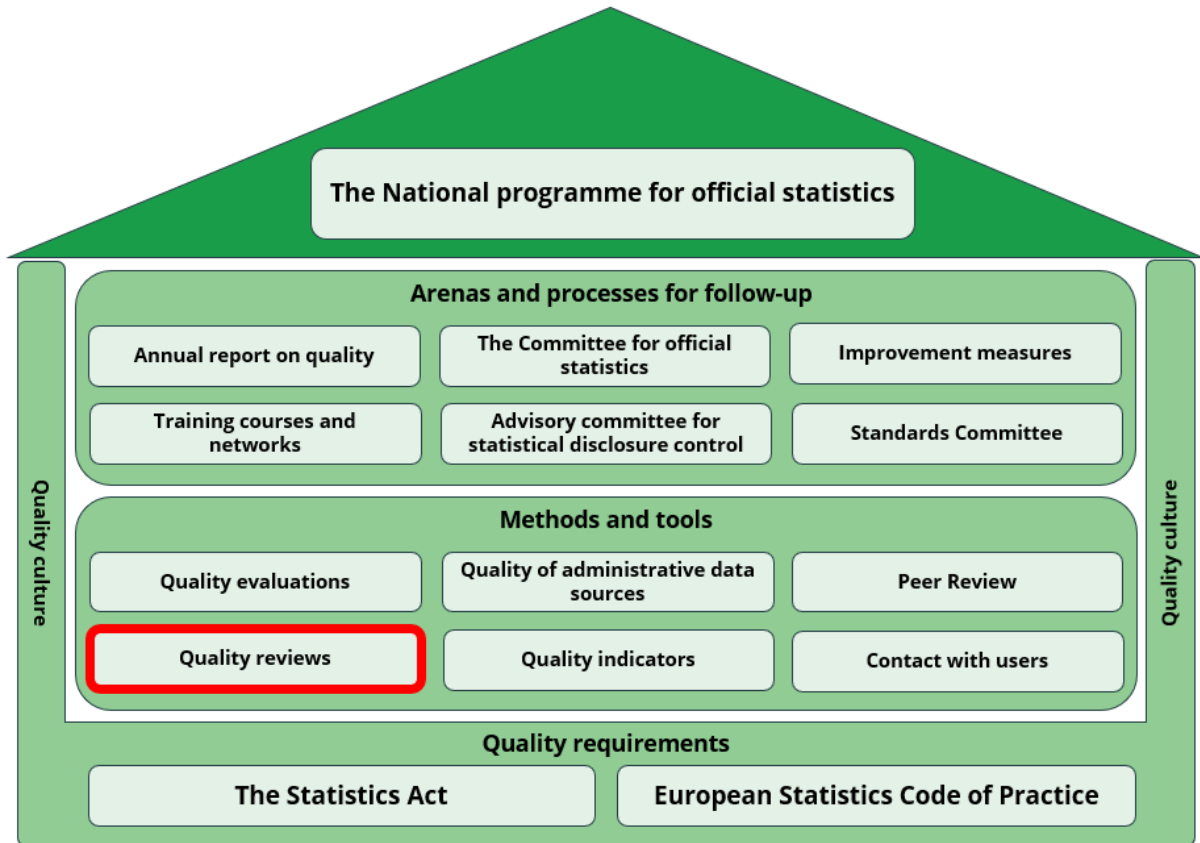
In the focus groups there are often surprises with views on statistical needs and dissemination of the statistics that were not previously known, and which are not captured by the other elements in quality reviews. An example of such a surprise from one of the reviews is that users do not use the statistics home/webpage to find relevant numbers. Rather, they call the people responsible for statistics and get information directly from them. This may indicate that the statistics page is not known or not user-friendly. But it can also be a sign of a high-level of service from those responsible for the statistics.

Views from the participants in the focus group always result in recommendations related to user needs and improved dissemination. Focus groups with users thus provide a basis for more relevant statistics and improved dissemination of the statistics!

Keywords: Official statistics, quality reviews, focus groups, user-orientation

1. Introduction

Figure 1: The Norwegian system for quality in official statistics



Quality reviews of individual statistics are one of the most important tools for assessing and measuring quality in the Norwegian system for quality in official statistics (SSB, 2019-2024). Such reviews have traditionally been relatively resource-intensive and only a few reviews have been carried out each year. The scheme for quality reviews is now streamlined so that more reviews can be carried out, with the same use of resources. In 2024, the plan is to carry out up to 6-7 quality reviews, half of which will be among other producers of official statistics. The quality reviews are organized and led by Statistics Norway's quality team, and otherwise involve statistics officers from the reviewed statistics and professional resources in dissemination, statistical methods, and questionnaire methodology.

A quality review results in a report with the following structure:

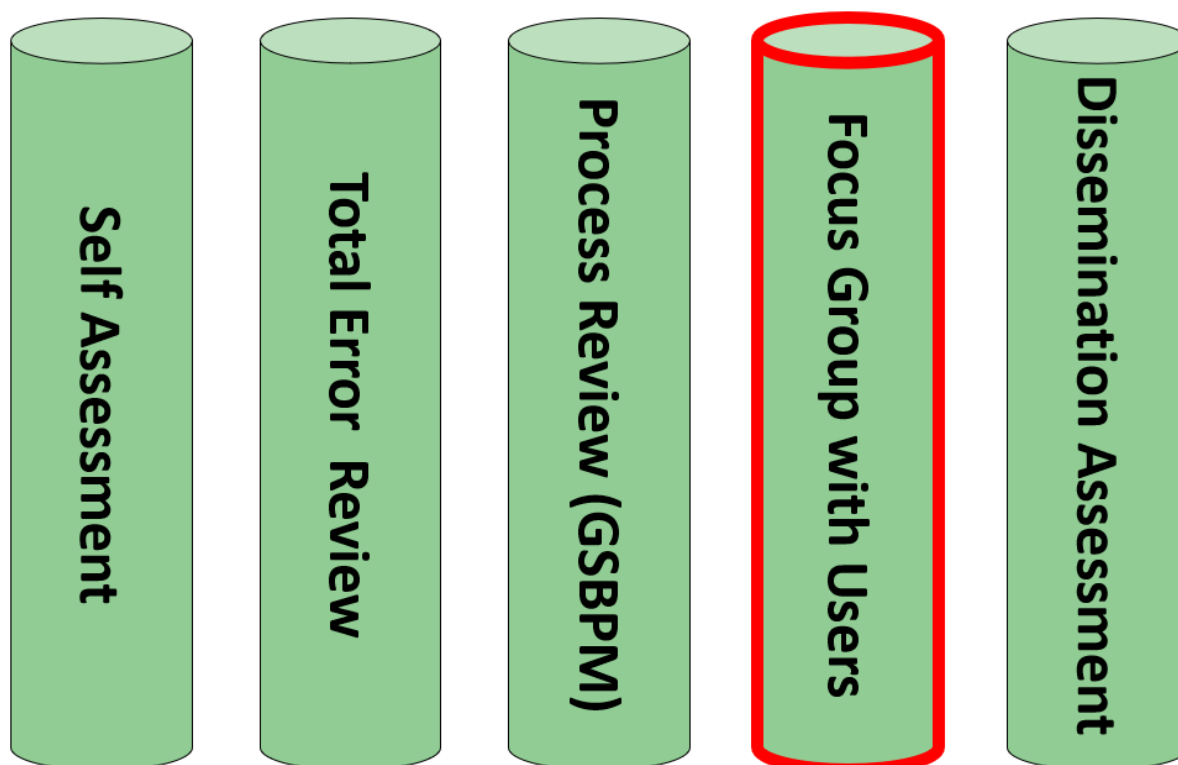
- Description of strengths and weaknesses of the statistics. This is captured by the various activities involved in a quality review.
- Based on strengths and weaknesses, the quality team makes recommendations to improve compliance with the quality requirements in the CoP and the Norwegian Statistics Act (SSB, 2019)

- Statistics officers formulate a plan for quality improvement actions that respond to the recommendations.

The statistics officers report annually on the status of the improvement actions.

Focus groups with users of the statistics are one of five¹ main activities in the scheme of quality reviews and provide important input for recommendations to the report from a quality review.

Figure 2: The five main activities of quality reviews

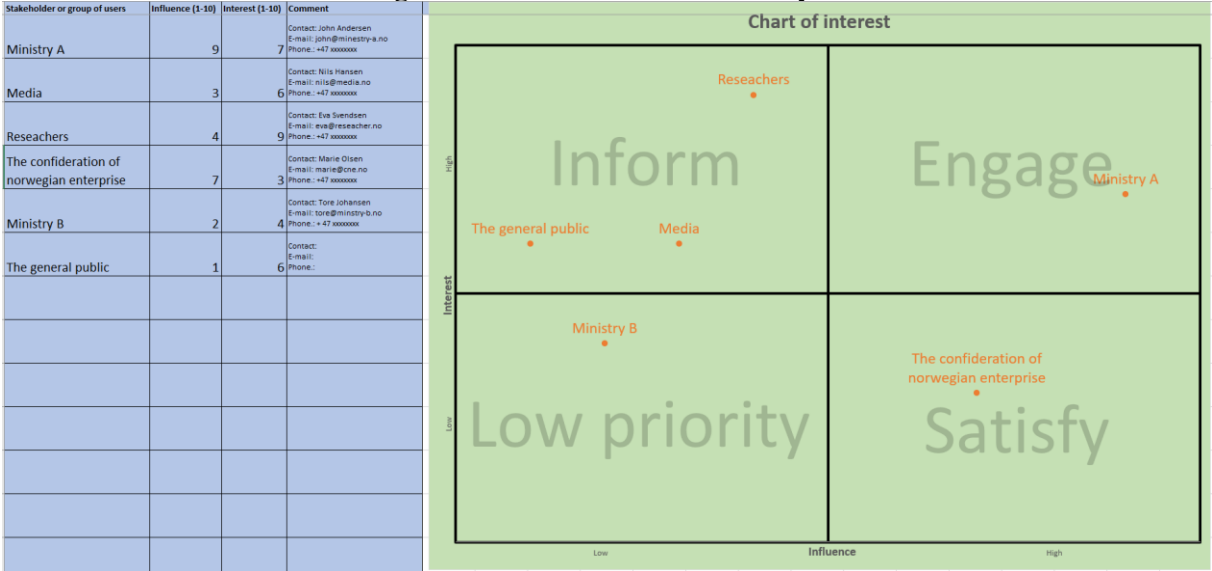


The participants of the focus groups are identified in a user and stakeholder analysis. Statistics officers fill in a template in which they list key users and give them a score for how much influence they have on statistics needs and how much they are impacted by the statistics. The users are thus known by the statistics officers, e.g. in that they often make contact and show great interest in the statistics, or that they are part of reference groups or other regular meetings for the statistics. The users who score the highest in this analysis are recruited to

¹ The five main activities: 1: Self-assessment questionnaire, 2: Total Error Review (Zhang, L-C, 2012), 3: Process Review (GSBPM) (UNECE, 2019), 4: Focus group with Users, 5: Dissemination assessment

participate in the focus groups. Often these are expert users from ministries or interest organizations in the working life. But it is also important to have different kind of users in the focus groups. Journalists, as representatives of the public, are therefore often included in the focus groups and often represent different perspectives on the statistics than the expert users.

Figure 3: User- and stakeholder analysis



2. Focus group with users

In this context, the purpose of focus groups is to gain knowledge of whether the statistics meet the user needs, and how the users assess the quality of the statistics.

Participants

The focus groups usually consist of 6-8 people who use the statistics. We place most of the emphasis on regular users of a particular statistic; That is, they use it regularly in their own work. These may be producers of other statistics where current statistics are included or public agencies that are dependent on the statistics. Other interesting users are journalists and researchers.

There is a difference in how users use the statistics, and experience shows that one should not mix different types of users. This is because they emphasize different characteristics and aspects of the statistics. Hence, the participants from different user group will not discuss the same issues or challenges. In such cases, we create two groups.

During and after the pandemic, focus groups are carried out digitally, using Microsoft Teams. We have found a limit of six participants to be useful, as the presence of others is not

as strong as when the participants are sitting in the same room. However, a clear advantage of using Teams, is that it is easier for the participants to join as they do not have to spend additional time on for instanced travel.

Organization of the conversation

The purpose is to bring out the good and less good aspects of the statistics, as experienced by the users. The participants are encouraged to be critical – that is, highlight aspects that they are not satisfied with. This means that other participants can support, , disagree or follow up with other elements. The conversation will then be able to help promote measures that can help improve statistics.

The conversation is structured around an interview guide, which largely rests on the five principles on statistical output in the Code of Practice:

- Relevance ("How well the statistics meet your needs")
- Accuracy and reliability ("The extent to which the numbers can be trusted")
- Timeliness and punctuality ("The extent to which the figures describe the current situation", "The time the figures are published")
- Coherence and comparability ("That the figures from Statistics Norway are comparable with other figures on the same topic")
- Accessibility and clarity ("Easy to find different results," "Good explanation of how the numbers are collected and what they say")

The conversation is led by a moderator who is independent of the statistics that are up for discussion. An independent moderator will have no interest in defending critical remarks that fall during the conversation. (*We do it like that because...*) We also avoid the moderator starting to explain the statistics to the participants (*You can find this by ...*). An independent moderator ensures that the focus is on the participants' experience of the statistics.

However, the producers of the statistic may join follow the group as observers. They turn their cameras and microphones off during and are not allowed to participate in the conversation. When the conversation is over, the participants are allowed to ask questions to the producers, and the producers may answer questions that have been raised during the conversation. Hence the producers and users need not be "unknown" to each other, but we want to ensure that the conversation does not leave the perspective of getting a grip on how the users perceive the quality of the statistics and is not influence by the producers themselves.

Ideally, the dialogue between the participants in a focus group will be an important driving force in the conversation, and many elements may be touched upon before they appear in the interview guide. In addition, the interaction between the participants may bring out elements that are not mentioned in the interview guide. The role of the moderator is to make sure that all elements are touched upon, but the order in which elements are discussed is not that important. The conversations should have a smooth flow and not be interrupted so that the conversation does not become too fragmented and divided. Opening for this kind of improvisation, unexpected elements may emerge. Of course, the moderator is also responsible for ensuring that the conversation stays within the framework of what is interesting.

Focus groups vs other approaches

What distinguishes focus groups from **reference groups**? Many statistics have reference groups where producer regularly meet users of the statistics. Some of the problems that are discussed in the focus groups is likely to arise in reference group meetings. The most significant difference is that the focus groups are led by an independent moderator and exclusively targets the users and their use of and their relationship to the quality of the statistics. The focus group also allows for a systematic review of different issues or aspects of the statistics. Another approach to measuring quality among users could be to conduct in-depth interviews with one user at a time. However, this would imply losing the group dynamics; An interview would be more static in that the findings would be limited to the interview guide and the interviewee's own head. The user would not have received input from like-minded people who could have expanded the discussion.

3. Impact on quality reviews from focus groups

A tally of recommendations from the four quality reviews that have been carried out since 2022 shows that a third of the recommendations have the focus groups as their main source. Some of these recommendations would probably have been captured in the other activities, but not all, and the focus group can be considered the main source of the recommendations. The counts are based on a limited number of reviews, and the recommendations can vary both in size, complexity, and degree of severity. The counts presented here do not give a precise picture of the influence of focus groups in quality reviews, but it shows how important it is to involve users directly in these reviews. Most of the needs and feedback that emerges in the focus groups are known to the statistics officers, but often there are also "surprises" in the focus groups, i.e. user needs or feedback on the statistics or statistics dissemination that were not known.

Most often, the recommendations are related to users wanting more relevant and comparable statistics, or better dissemination of the statistics. The recommendations based on the focus groups can mainly be divided into the following groups according to the quality principles in the CoP:

- The quality principle of relevance (11): Users want further development of the statistics with more variables and/or higher granularity.
- The quality principle of comparability and coherence (12): Users want longer time series, better comparability with other countries or better variable definitions for improved coherence.
- The quality principle of accessibility and clarity (15): Users want analyzes that explain trends and why the figures change. Furthermore, they often have views on the statistics page, how it is designed and options for navigation, and more use of visual tools in the dissemination of the statistics. Users can also point to a need for improved documentation, e.g. on the difference between preliminary and final figures.

Regarding the quality requirements of timeliness and punctuality (13) and accuracy and reliability (12), it is rare that there are recommendations from the focus groups, although in some cases there may be requests for improved timeliness or a better description of uncertainty in the statistics.

It is not usual for the focus groups to uncover serious deficiencies in compliance with the quality principles. Not all user needs are possible or appropriate to meet. There may be technical and resource-related obstacles or needs that cannot be resolved for reasons of statistical confidentiality. Often a cost/benefit assessment of the individual needs must be made. How big is the gain and how big is the cost? All such needs must then be assessed, and priority must be given to measures which can be solved and provide the greatest value for the users.

Much of the input from focus groups is already known and captured through other user contact, such as e.g. regular meetings with expert users, inquiries directly from users, or via user surveys. But the way in which quality reviews and focus groups are carried out means that the views from users are given great weight and are followed up more systematically. Recommendations from the quality team provide an obligation for statistics officers to follow up. The quality team asks for the status of improvement measures annually, and the statistics sections have thus seen pressure from outside to carry out the improvement measures.

The focus groups not only shed light on user satisfaction but also serve as a crucial component in quality assessments. A consistent finding is that users express great confidence in Statistics Norway and the Norwegian statistics system and that official statistics are regarded as very reliable. Furthermore, the statistics bank with the possibility to put together own tables and extract data mechanically using the API is highlighted as a major strength.

Carrying out the actions means that compliance with one or more quality principles is improved for the assessed statistics. Measures can also have an effect beyond the statistics being assessed, in that they are relevant and can be implemented for other similar statistics at the same time, or in that improvements in common dissemination products benefit more or all official statistics. In this sense, focus groups with users contribute to raising the quality of official statistics in general.

4. Conclusions

Quality reviews of individual statistics are an important element in the Norwegian system for quality in official statistics. By involving users of statistics in focus groups, we get direct feedback and input on the statistics from the users in such reviews. Sometimes there is feedback and needs that are not known and nor captured in other activities in quality reviews. The input from focus groups forms the basis for improvement actions linked to improved compliance with the quality requirements in The CoP and The Statistics Act. Although much of the feedback from the users in focus groups is already known, the way a quality review is carried out means that feedback from the users is given great weight and is followed up systematically by improvement actions with annual status reporting. Carrying out the improvement actions means that compliance with the quality requirements is improved with more relevant statistics or improved dissemination of the statistics. In many cases, the improvement actions have an effect beyond the statistics being reviewed, in that they are relevant and can be implemented for other statistics, or that they deal with improvements in common dissemination products that are used by several or all official statistics. Focus groups with users thus contribute to raising the quality of individual statistics, but also the quality of the statistics system in general.

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