Reviewer’s report

**Title:** Establishing confidence in the output of qualitative research synthesis: the ConQual approach

**Version:** 1  **Date:** 15 March 2014

**Reviewer:** James Thomas

**Reviewer’s report:**

The aim of the tool is novel and important, and there is certainly a need for this work which makes it of importance in this field. I do think the tool is under-developed (or at least under-described) for its ambition at the moment though; that the critical issue of “what is confidence” needs to be addressed in this paper; and that the example hinted at in Table 1 needs to be detailed properly in the text.

Specific questions to peer reviewers:

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
   This is not a research article.
2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?
   Ditto – not a research article.
3. Are the data sound?
   Ditto
4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
   n/a
5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
   n/a
6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
   My earlier comments address this.
7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?
   As mentioned below, I think CerQual should be referenced.
8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
   Yes
9. Is the writing acceptable?
   I think it needs a careful proof-read: there are punctuation mistakes and readability would be aided if more commas were used throughout. For example:
By following this approach, a GRADE score (this can be High, Moderate, Low or Very low) which represents confidence in the synthesised findings is then applied to the major results of a quantitative systematic review.

p.10 an apostrophe missing from “authors’ interpretation”.

My numbered comments are as follows:

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. ConQual is presented as a tool for expressing confidence in any qualitative synthesis, but it does not appear to have been tested outside a fairly limited number of meta aggregative reviews; and the range of perspectives which informed its development is similarly narrow. The ambition of the tool is significant: to be a GRADE-like tool for any qualitative synthesis, and I do think that its development needs to reflect this scope – with greater engagement with the range of reviews and the community of reviewers for whom the tool is intended for use. (I have had some involvement in the development of the CerQual tool – see below – which, even though it has had far more consultation and testing than ConQual, is not yet considered ready for formal publication.)

The two tools are almost identical in their objectives, but have quite different ways of assessing confidence; there is therefore likely to be ‘space’ for both of them, though at the moment I think it would be safer to describe the ConQual tool as being suitable for meta aggregative reviews rather than any qualitative synthesis.

2. In the methods, the question of ‘what confidence is in terms of synthesised qualitative research findings’ is posed to begin with, but this is not answered explicitly later on. I think this is critical for understanding this paper though: we need a definition of “confidence”. Are you saying that greater confidence helps us to know (for example) that the findings are a genuine reflection of the research? Or that they can be transferred between contexts? Or..? It’s hard to think of confidence in an abstract way as it usually refers to your confidence in the ability of something to behave in the expected way.

3. I think the statement that there is no corresponding approach in qualitative reviews needs some tempering. The CerQual tool has been under development for a while and it has been used in at least one published review. It has also been presented at Colloquia and been the subject of discussion at GRADE meetings. I think it would be worth the authors contacting Simon Lewin and seeing whether he can send through the current draft of the CerQual tool; you could then write a section in the discussion about how the two tools differ.


Barriers and facilitators to the implementation of lay health worker programmes to improve access to maternal and child health: qualitative evidence synthesis. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2013;10:CD010414. dx.doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD010414.pub2

4. Pp7-8: “One way to improve the practicality and usefulness of the findings of a qualitative systematic review is to undertake a process to establish the confidence in these findings.” I didn’t follow the argument here: why should confidence affect practicality or utility?

5. Realist synthesis isn’t explicitly a method for synthesising qualitative research, so I don’t think it really belongs in the list of methods on page 5.

6. Re the sentence pp5-6: “This meta-aggregative method is the only approach to explicitly align itself with the philosophy of pragmatism in order to deliver readily useable synthesised findings to inform decision making at the clinical or policy level…”. Presumably the other methods also aim to do this too; are you saying that meta-aggregation does it better thanks to its use of pragmatism? If so, then we need to know how.

7. P.9: “Therefore, the quality of the included studies directly impacts the quality of the meta-synthesis”. Surely the purpose of the exercise is the opposite? That the critical appraisal process ensures that the syntheses are of a consistently high standard, removing any ‘malign’ influences of poorer quality studies?

8. I think it is worth reflecting on the suitability of an ordinal scale for assessing confidence in qualitative research. Some qualitative researchers would certainly say that this is inappropriate. In particular, what is the justification for having a linear reduction (why should the boundaries be where they are?); does confidence increase and decrease in a linear way?

9. In Table 1, I wasn’t sure what the purpose of the ‘type of research’ column was. If this is for qualitative research, will this column see much variation? In relation to this, I think the worked example needs to be a proper worked example, so we see statements from the research studies etc which led you to downgrade.

Minor Essential Revisions

10. Last sentence of background in the abstract: something isn’t quite right with the grammar here. Can it be fixed by deleting the “a” from “… findings and a summary…”?

11. Again in the abstract, we first hear about the working group in the ‘results’ section: should it be described before?

Discretionary Revisions

12. Re the statement in the first sentence in the abstract: is this tool only for qualitative syntheses where they are “complementing” an effectiveness review? If not, then the emphasis given here should probably change.
P13. 8 “After much debate”. Are there any issues that it would be helpful for the reader to know about? In particular I’m interested in why these concepts have been selected above the others the working group discussed. What process led to their selection?

P.14 CerQual and ConQual are very similar names for two tools with the same objectives. It might be worth exploring whether it would be sensible to differentiate their names more in order to avoid confusion.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

While I am not an author of the CerQual tool referred to in my report, I have attended consultation meetings to contribute to its development. I have tried to review the paper in a neutral way however, so my greater knowledge of the CerQual tool should not have affected my judgement as to the strengths and weaknesses of the work presented here.