

Description:	Focus groups generate qualitative data to describe, explain or characterise issues on a theme. This is usually through a facilitated discussion for the purposes of the research, involving a group of around 6-10. The group needs to be large enough to get a range of views but small enough to get everyone engaged and keep it informal.
Application:	Focus groups are often used to find out the range of views about an activity or situation and in relation to views about the future. They can also be a useful pre-cursor to other types of research, for example to capture the range of opinions before developing a survey or to cognitively test a questionnaire.
Type of evidence:	Qualitative. OfS Type 1 (narrative).
Strengths:	Gathering information through focus groups is one way of broadening out the evidence base to include qualitative data and more in-depth perspectives than can be gained through surveys for example. Focus groups are particularly helpful when you want to identify areas of consensus and difference amongst people who share common characteristics (i.e. between participants in an activity or a stakeholder group). They can help to generate verbatim feedback/quotes to illustrate perceptions about a topic or activity.
	They give the facilitator opportunities to clarify understanding and probe for more information to add greater insights.
Weaknesses:	Although focus groups can be useful to test a particular hypothesis or programme theory, it is not usually possible to make generalisable inferences from this type of evidence.
	Focus groups can be effective for exploring in-depth perspectives but are not so useful for assessing the frequency of views/perspectives across a population.
	Focus groups are small scale-research and the session should last no more than an hour so the number of topics which can be covered tends to be limited in order to allow time for multiple voices to be heard in the discussion.
	In impact evaluations, focus groups are useful to unpick the process involved in achieving outcomes.
Mixed Methods:	You can use focus groups and surveys in a complementary way, for example, by convening a focus group to identify the range of opinion within a representative group of young, and then following up in a large scale questionnaire survey to assess the scale
	Focus groups provide qualitative data. Whilst they can be valuable in themselves, they can also shed light on and add depth to quantitative analysis. They can be useful in helping to explore issues as part of the design phase when developing a quantitative survey instrument in order to inform the range of views/response categories, or as part of cognitive testing a survey instrument.
Expertise:	High
Requirements:	Focus groups are relatively time and resource intensive to set up. Focus groups do require a skilled facilitator. Using someone with the right skills and experience is important to be able to put participants at ease, as well as being able to deal with disengagement, or domination of the discussion by a few voices, or uncomfortable situations such as differences of opinion. The location of the group is important (an accessible and welcoming environment is needed, ideally in a 'neutral' space). focus groups usually involve providing an incentive such as refreshments and payment/vouchers to acknowledge people's time. and allowing for resources to reimburse participants can be useful to ensure attendance, for example paying for

travel. The data can be time consuming to analyse, and as focus groups are usually recorded there will be costs involved for transcription of the recording of the focus group.

Ethical considerations: Consent issues are trickier to handle in focus group research than in other situations because of the challenge in giving in advance a clear account of what will take place in the group. The process of consent involves creating appropriate expectations in the participant, and this may be hard to achieve if the discussion is unpredictable. Strategies that can be used include giving as much information about what is expected in the consent process and agreeing ground rules with the group at the start of the session. Skillful facilitation is needed to ensure that participants have the chance to contribute in the way they might expect, whilst also avoiding the discussion being hijacked. Participants also need to have the opportunity to withdraw consent and this is not straightforward because it is a group interaction.

Confidentiality is potentially more problematic than in an interview for example because the researcher has only limited control over what the participants communicate outside the group. It is probably best to avoid any discussion that could encourage over-disclosure by participants. Setting ground rules for participants at the start of the group can help here.

Risk of harm may come into play in a focus group because they could involve discussion of potentially sensitive topics in a public forum. You should try to avoid setting up groups with such conflicting views that there is a risk of distress. Similarly, in selecting participants for a group try to take account of power dynamics and conflicts of interest. Approaches to minimize harm could include declaring some topics off limits and steering the discussion in another direction or trying to minimise their impact when sensitive topics arise. It can be difficult to get a balance between avoiding distress and ensuring participants to whom such discussion may be important or beneficial are heard. On the other hand, there are also challenges in assessing harm because some seemingly innocuous topics might cause stress to some people.

Planning in a ‘debrief’ at the end of the focus group can be useful to summarise the issues emerging with the participants, reiterate key messages (e.g. around confidentiality) and clarify any potentially sensitive issues that raised or discuss reactions to such issues. The facilitator should also encourage participants to approach them at the end of the group if they have any issues or concerns (including if they want to withdraw consent at that point).

If you want to use quotes, then you need to make sure you have got participants permission to do so. You are not offering anonymity if you use verbatim quotes, but you do need to ensure external confidentiality by not reporting quotes in a way that could identify the person.

Work planning: You need to think carefully about how to select participants for inclusion in a focus group – and have a rationale for why they are included. If you have a way of selecting a representative group of people this can be helpful.

A pre-prepared script is important to develop the ground rules and to structure the session. You could include visual prompts or an activity as part of the sessions to make it more engaging. The first session could be treated as a pilot. Advice on running focus groups is available at:

<https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/steer/2019/05/01/thinking-pedagogically-about-qualitative-research-in-he/>

Ideally a recording device will be used (or if not a dedicated note taker who can capture the discussion in a verbatim way). It is also helpful to note reflections during or immediately after the group (including visual aspects such as participant body language).

There's no fixed rule about how many focus groups to hold, if the target group is relatively homogenous then 3-6 sessions is normally sufficient to capture most themes. However, you may need to do more if your sample frame is complex in order to include every category of potential participant and you may need to

use homogeneous groups, because mixing some groups can be an issue (for example, mixing managers and staff members).

Analysis: When analysing qualitative data, you can organise the comments made into categories. This method then allows you to see where the balance of opinion and differences were and the most common themes.

Reporting: Focus group findings are likely to be of considerable interest to the Praxis Team which is generally concerned with detail and nuance and exploration of the data with the Team can often provide further insights.

For formal reports and presentations. Quotes and comments can complement and illuminate findings from other methods such as questionnaire surveys

Focus Group data can help to provide the rationale for research questions and the evaluation approach.

Focus groups: Case study/Practice example

The WP team at Oxford Brookes has included use of focus groups with students as part of the evaluation of their student ambassador training activities. This scheme aims for 75% of recruits from a WP background. As well as student ambassador training, the recruits also take part in employability training where ambassadors reflect on what skills they have gained from working on programme.

The evaluation of the training for student ambassadors not only aims to measure the extent to which the student ambassador training programme facilitates students becoming an excellent student ambassador, but also the extent to which student ambassadors have the tools/resources/behaviours they need to ensure their success during and after university. They therefore wanted to find out about the extent to which the student ambassador training programme enables student ambassadors to consolidate their skillset to enhance future employability and develop the capacity to demonstrate skills to potential employers, and the extent to which the student ambassador training programme enables student ambassadors to extend and apply knowledge to specific areas of postgraduate study and graduate employment. The team also hope to measure and evaluate the extent to which the student ambassador training programme enables student ambassadors to engage reflexively with support services and other students to articulate and reflect upon academic identity, belonging and personal development.

The intention is to run focus groups at the mid point in the programme, and various points in the student ambassadors student journey, to help with the medium and long term evaluation (along with a pre and post survey, interviews and use of reflective diaries). Tracking is being put in place to assess success at university and graduate prospects.

Key questions for the focus group research relate to whether their training has enabled them to become an excellent student ambassador, what training they need, improvements etc.; questions related to academic identify, belonging and personal development; what skills they ambassadors would like to develop, employability skills gained and career goals. Consideration is also being given to researching how being a student ambassador affect their graduate choices.

References:

Adapted from Evaluation Plan – Student Ambassadors, Oxford Brookes University