

Student focus groups

Undertaking focus groups with students is a good way to explore issues and generate feedback on your teaching.

Focus groups are good for:

- Getting detailed qualitative feedback
- Developing discussion and generating ideas
- Exploring issues in depth



PREPARATION:

Focus group script / questions; recruitment of groups; participant incentives.



TIMING:

30-60 minutes per group plus analysis time.



EQUIPMENT:

Digital recorder, optional prompts (e.g. photographs).

1

DECIDE ON FOCUS

Start by deciding what areas you want to focus on. This will depend in part on how long you have for your focus groups – anything from fifteen minutes to an hour can work, but for shorter sessions it is easier to work with smaller groups of students. Select a small number (three is ideal) of key overarching questions or areas you want to explore.

2

WRITE QUESTION SCRIPT

Building on the initial areas, you now need to write a more detailed script of questions that drill down into the specifics of the topic. Start with core questions and have follow-up questions for each area. Some groups talk a lot while others say little, so it is good to have lots of optional questions.

3

CONSIDER DATA ETHICS

Participants will need to give full informed consent and have the right to withdraw at any time. It is useful to produce an information sheet so that they know what data will be collected and how it will be used, whether the data will be recorded, whether direct quotes are used, and whether it will be anonymised.

4

RECRUIT STUDENTS

This is often the hardest part of this approach. Think about how you can best get students to engage by finding times when they are on campus and offering incentives (pizza usually goes down well). Recruit more students than you need because there is always drop-off. Consider how you can make engagement equitable to ensure a representative sample.

5

RUN FOCUS GROUPS

Carry out your groups in a quiet, private space. Decide whether you will audio record and transcribe, take notes yourself, or use a note-taker. Make sure that all students in the group are given the chance to share their views and use the follow-up questions to tease out detail. If an interesting side-track appears, it is up to you whether you stick to the script or follow it.

6

ANALYSE DATA

Review your notes or transcript, looking for ideas and themes that have emerged to address the questions in your focus areas. Be careful to consider how representative an opinion is rather than just who shouted loudest. It's easy also to experience confirmation bias (where you're naturally drawn to ideas that echo your own) so be alert to this and have your conclusions reviewed by a colleague.

7

EVIDENCE

When reporting feedback from focus groups, make sure you add contextual information, such as the number of groups, students, and any biases in recruitment. Use direct quotes to add colour, but make sure that you provide information on how likely it is that the ideas expressed are representative.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

