



National
Co-ordinating
Centre for
Public Engagement

How to... ...organise focus groups

Introduction

This guide is an output from the [vinspired students project](#).

Whether to test ideas for new projects, to uncover attitudes to volunteering or understand the needs of the community, focus groups are a straightforward way for research into student volunteering; they also benefit from students as the researchers.

Focus groups have proved to be a highly insightful research technique for engaging a group of people with a question, product or idea. Bringing together a group to discuss a particular topic provides a more natural setting than one-to-one interviews, as it allows participants to share their stories and through discussion can enable new strands of thought to emerge. Therefore, this qualitative research method can generate rich data in a less resource intensive manner than interviewing.

Using a focus group to engage with questions of public engagement can form part of the design process of a wider survey, or it can uncover the opinions of key stakeholders. The purpose of this guide is to help you to think about the structure of your focus group and how it can bring benefits to student volunteering provisions.

Getting started

The design, size and facilitation of a focus group can be flexible, though key to success is having clear aims and objectives and keeping it enjoyable and useful for the participants, to ensure the information gathered is the most useful. Compared to mapping techniques focus groups are more structured, and researchers are more interactive with the participants.

The importance of focus groups is to allow conversations to flow and develop, rather than to encourage the answers you expect. To enable these conversations to occur it is important to clearly plan the focus group, creating a topic guide and secondly to think carefully about the facilitation of the session.

What are the questions you want to answer?

Having decided to hold a focus group to conduct research the next step is to reflect as a team on the aims and objectives of the research and how to ensure the focus groups answers your questions specifically. A topic guide needs to be planned in advance; this outlines the areas for discussion during the focus group, with key ideas and questions to be discussed.

It is useful to construct the topic guide, with the thought of a conversation in mind rather than interview questions. Therefore, include topic questions, possibly with areas for prompting rather than exact questions. It is also important to think about the guide flexibly, as topics may be covered in a different order, in light of conversation.

It is useful to think through, during this planning stage, about 'danger' areas of discussion, this is where questions may lead to discussion which is not wholly useful to the research topic. It is also

important to ensure the facilitator is aware of these and comfortable with ways of ensuring discussion moves back on track.

Additionally, it may be helpful to include in the guide some activities or ideas for stimulating conversation and keeping the session engaging for the participants.

When might you want to hold a focus group, who would be the most useful participants?

It is important to think carefully about the mix of individuals you wish to take part in the focus group. More interesting ideas can emerge from a diverse range of individuals, as their experiences and attitudes may be broader. Though if wanting a range of viewpoints, it is important to feel all participants will feel comfortable in expressing their opinions on the subject. This also needs to be considered in the size of the group, about 6-8 is ideal, although you may want to invite up to 10 in case some drop out, as it can prove challenging to confirm attendees. Additionally, depending on your aims and objectives considering your participants may also require you to think about how many focus groups you want to hold and the resources this will require.

Depending upon the aims of the focus group it may be that individuals are chosen and personally invited, as may be the case if looking for the perspective of community groups and their experience with student volunteers. Alternatively, it could be carried out in a less selective manner, which may be helpful if trying to approach students who are not already engaged with your work. For example, if recruiting students, the focus group could be held as part of a wider event, such as a volunteer fair, attracting participants on the day.

Who could facilitate a focus group?

The discussion is guided by the topics selected in advance and introduced by a facilitator who asks questions; this role is core to the success of the focus group and the person needs to feel comfortable with carefully managing discussion.

It is useful to consider a person with whom the group will feel at ease. As such, if holding a focus group with students, using student peer- researchers to lead the discussion may be more productive as students often feel more comfortable talking to their peers rather than to staff members or academics. (See our Guide to Peer-led qualitative research)

Secondly, depending on your aims, it may also be helpful to include observers in addition to the facilitator, either for writing notes or 'sparks' who take a role in discussion offering opposing arguments to encourage new ideas into the group if necessary.

It is vital to involve the facilitator and any observers in the planning stages, helping to create the topic guides which shape discussion.

How can the session be structured?

There are a number of options for the format of the focus group. It is important to be flexible with timings and allow the conversations to reach a natural conclusion, usually lasts around one to two hours, but these should not be rigidly timetabled. It is important to let everyone have a chance to contribute to the discussion – don't let one or two people dominate.

A focus group can also be conducted through conference calls or online, enabling discussion to encompass national or even international viewpoints easily and in a cost-effective manner.

You need to record the focus group to ensure the data captured can be analysed later. This can be achieved through detailed note taking. A preferred option is to record the session, so that a transcript of what was said can be written up later. Digital recorders are usually available for hire from your university. It should be noted transcription takes considerable time to carry out. A debrief of the session with the facilitators and any observers is also useful as they may have further insights.

Example session

There are a number of stages to a focus group, outlined below indicating how it was done for researching student volunteering, with facilitation generally being led by student researchers.

- **Stage 1: Setting the scene** – the facilitator should introduce the topic and explain the purposes of the focus group. Participants must be able to give their 'informed consent' to take part. It is very important that the participants taking part in the focus group understand why you are running the session, how recordings will be used and that they are free to leave the session at any time. You can explain this verbally to the whole group at the start of the session but you also should consider preparing a leaflet explaining the project. You should also negotiate consent to record the focus group.
- **Stage 2: Introductions** – go around the table and ask everyone to introduce themselves, stating their first name clearly. This will be important for writing up the recording later. You can also ask participants to give a short answer to an introductory question to get everyone involved in the discussion from the outset.
- **Stage 3: Discussion** – It is likely that the discussion will take place in a different order to that listed on the topic guide. The facilitator should also be prepared to tactfully steer the group back to the topics under consideration if the conversation goes too much off track.
- **Stage 4: Keeping engaged** - the facilitator should be prepared to change the format of the discussion if needed to ensure the most useful discussion can occur. This may be by introducing an activity based around the questions or a light-hearted activity.
- **Stage 5: Ending the discussion** – it is good to end the discussion with a 'closing round', asking each participant in turn to offer final reflections or answer a final question. Followed by informing the participants of the next steps with the research and how they can stay informed or involved with the work.

How can you analyse the focus group?

Analysing the focus group will involve firstly revisiting your aims and objectives, then looking through the detailed notes or a full transcript if you have had the time to produce one. You are aiming to identify key themes and points of consensus or disagreement as well as noting useful quotations which reflect the purposes of your research. You can read more about qualitative data analysis in textbooks below.

Top Tips

- Think carefully about the location of your focus group and ensure you provide refreshments; the space needs to help the participants to feel comfortable
- Although participants do not necessarily need to be paid for their involvement, it is important to ensure expenses, such as travel costs are reimbursed
- It may be useful to offer incentives to encourage those not close to the research area to participate, such as vouchers
- If recording the session be sure to familiarise yourself with the technical equipment beforehand
- Always have a debrief with the facilitator, they are likely to have a different view of the session and can be helpful in revisiting the data during the reporting stage

Resources

[BURSTING THE BUBBLE: FULL REPORT](#)

Students, Volunteering and the Community Research. This report presents findings of a study on student volunteering.



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